

Wrestling with Prayer

Genesis 32: 24-32

In the time I have been asking this congregation to bring your deepest questions to church, the one topic ask about more often than any other is prayer. That is not really surprising. Prayer is basic to faith. It is our way of relating to God. As a result, I have had the opportunity to write enough about prayer to fill a small book. Copies of this booklet, *Thoughts About Prayer*, are available on the Crossroads website (www.crossroadschurchkc.org).

Today's Ask Jack questions again concern prayer. These are deep and meaningful questions, honest and challenging questions. How can I pray believing, with faith and hope, when it seems my prayer has not been answered or accept a "no" when that doesn't fit my image of God? How do we pray to an entity who is energy rather than a Supreme Being; is prayer more than just talking to yourself? The scripture text I've chosen to answer these questions is a portion of the story of Jacob the brother of Esau, son of Isaac and Rebecca, and grandson of Abraham and Sarah.

Do you remember Jacob? He is the one who tricked his twin brother Esau out of his birthright and paternal blessing. Jacob was forced to run away for fear of Esau. He lived in the wilderness and eventually made a life for himself. Years later, he returned from his wilderness wandering determined to make peace with Esau and reunite the family. Jacob's entire experience of being in the wilderness was encapsulated in one night, on the eve of his reunion with his brother. Walking alone, Jacob encounters and wrestles a man or perhaps an angel or perhaps God. Jacob experience what today we call a dark night of the soul.

Jacob wrestled and, afterward, was given a new name – Israel. All night Jacob wrestled with demons of his own making, his own selfish ambition, deceiving his brother, and the real fear of Esau's revenge. Prayer can be like wrestling with demons, with self, and with God.

Have you ever felt that your prayer just was not answered? Has it ever felt like the only response you got was a deafening silence or just a big NO? If prayer is how we relate to God, how can we trust in and keep working on that relationship when we run into a dead end? How can we move forward in that relationship when we get no response back, no response to our efforts at communication? What does that mean? It can feel like either nobody's there or they just don't want to talk to you.

Do you ever send an e-mail or leave a phone message and get no response? The reality is that you are not receiving a response in the way you expect to receive it. How do you feel when that happens? You might feel puzzled or confused. The feeling might move to hurt and then to angry. Eventually you might just write them off dismissively.

It is possible that *nobody's* there. In terms of prayer, it may be that there is no deeper reality oriented to us. Our faith may be in vain. We may just be on our own and, in that case, we must decide how to orient our lives based on what we see around us. It is also possible that the *answer* from whatever higher power is there is just always *no* – like some cosmic auto-responder. In that case, if we care at all, we might get frustrated. We might despair about the

universe being cruel or indifferent. We might lose hope because there might as well be nobody there.

Either way, it's a dead end. If there's no response, it's a dead end. *No* as the response? Dead end. If the higher powers don't want to talk with you, that's a dead end. If they don't have enough bars on their cell phone, even that's a dead end. What do you do when you hit a dead end? You back out and start over again. You find a detour.

Life's detours begin at our dead ends. The death of one direction is the birth of a new one. Resurrection is the law of life written into the scarred tissue of humanity. Old things must pass away in order that all things may be made new. Much of our kicking, screaming, complaining, depression, and projection of blame is little more than our desire to hang on to a patently dead past. In truth, we die a little or a lot when our way of life no longer moves us into fuller relationship to God, to ourselves, and to others. (Dr. Wayne Oates, *Life's Detours*)

Dead ends and detours are where faith is engaged. I realize that's not necessarily not very comforting, but it is true. Faith is the choice to believe that God **is**. Faith is the choice to believe that the "no" or the silence is not the whole story and not the last word.

But what if there's no one there at all, no God hearing our prayers? What if we're just talking to ourselves or what if "God" is just non-personal energy? To tell the truth, there is the real possibility that the reality we call God is more like what we call energy than like a "big guy in the sky." It is very likely the idea of God as personal and as a supreme being is symbolic language – an image for a God with whom/which we can relate. Theological Paul Tillich describes it this way: "our personal center is grasped by [numinous reality, the] manifestation of the inaccessible ground and abyss of all meaning." (Theology of Culture, 132).

God is personal because God lives in us and in all other persons. I still relate to God in terms of my experience. I still find it a natural practice to think of God in personal terms just like I often find it help to converse with God in the language of words. I have to remember that this is an image of God. The reality of God is much more!

You and I are on a journey. We are on a journey through time, from birth to death to what lies beyond death. For us, this seems like a reasonable perspective, but it is a perspective centered on our own experience rather than on God.

We share that journey as a community here at Crossroads. We share it with each other and with all people alive today, with all who have ever lived, and with all who will ever live. It is a centered on God. As children of God, we were created in eternity and for eternity, for oneness with God. On the journey through the years of our lives, we are largely cut off from a clear awareness of our home. The result is that much of life is shaped around a core of fear. Many of our choices are the result of fear. Even our prayers can flow from a center of fear.

Jesus lived in touch with eternity, one with the Father, and in touch with eternal unity. We follow Jesus on the same path toward same the goal of oneness that the Bible calls *shalom* and the Kingdom of God. Remember that this kingdom is not so much a place to go after we die, but the reality that surrounds and supports life here and now on the journey. The pathway of prayer

is approaching all of life with an attitude of gratitude, being truly grateful for all of life and our experience of it. This does not mean we should live in a naïve state of denial. Many things are broken, or at least bent, in the world. The most fundamentally broken thing is how we live out of touch with the universal mystery, the One, the reality we call God.

Kansas City native Marlo Morgan wrote an amazing story, a modern parable of her experience walking across the Australian Outback with an aboriginal tribe. More than all else, this is a story about prayer, about living in synch with God. Some two months into the walkabout, the tribe decided that it was her turn to lead, to take responsibility for setting the direction and leading everyone to food and water.

So we began to walk with me assuming the lead position. It seemed hotter than 105. [They walked all day and found no food and no water.] That night I asked for help. No one responded. We walked a second day under my leadership. Again the heat was severe. By now my throat was closing. It was becoming impossible for me to swallow. My tongue was so dry, it was almost stiff. Breathing was difficult. I knew that, if the tribe did not help me soon, we would all certainly die. The second day passed without food, water, or help. That night I think I passed out instead of going to sleep.

On the third morning, I went to every individual in the group. On my knees, I begged loudly as my dying body would permit. "Please help me. Please save us." "We are hungry and thirsty too, but this is your experience. We support you totally in what you must learn." We walked and walked. The air was still. The world was totally inhospitable. There was no help, no way out. I was dying. These were the signs of fatal dehydration.

[Questions arose for her as life seemed to flash before her eyes.] Had I accomplished what my life was intended for? Dear God, help me understand. What is happening? Instantly the answer came. I had traveled over 10,000 miles from my American hometown, but had not budged one inch in thinking. I had, up to that moment, considered myself different, separate, apart. I had to become one with them, one with the universe, communicate mind to mind as they did. Mentally I said, "thank you" to the source of this revelation. In my mind I cried out, "Help me! Please help me!" I used the words I heard the tribe say each morning, "If it is in my highest good and the highest good for all of life everywhere, let me learn."

Amazingly, felt led to water and obviously survived. She observed, "I look upward into the vast expanse of the world surrounding us and, giving thanks, finally understood that the world is truly a place of abundance. It is full of kind supporting people to share our lives if we let them. There is food and water for all beings everywhere if we are open to receiving and open to giving. But most of all, I now appreciated the abundant spiritual guidance available in my life. Help was available in every stress, including a brush with death and the very act of dying, now that I had gotten past doing it my way" (Marlo Morgan, *Mutant Message Down Under*)

May our prayer and our wrestling with prayer, with God, with each other, and with ourselves lead to self-discovery, new identity, new perspective, and new life. May we learn the lesson of abundance in all situations. Thank you for the faith to take life's detours and the courage to change and grow in our thinking and our living on the journey following Jesus.