



Date: September 25, 2016

Title: "A Third Kind of Prayer"

Scripture: Matthew 17:1-8

Description: How can we pray in the face of long-term suffering? Two conventional-style prayers ask for a miracle healing or simply for God's presence. There is a third kind of prayer, using the transfiguration story as a model.

I overheard a conversation at the coffee bar before worship. Two people greeted each other, asked how the week was, commented on the UGA game, and complained about how busy they are these days. Then, just as they were finishing, one of them reached out and held the friend's forearm. Her tone changed and was more serious. "Say a prayer for my dad, will you?" she said. "His dementia is really kicking in now, and I think he's losing himself inch by unrelenting inch. Except recently it's more like he's losing mile by mile." Her eyes revealed the cost of what she was saying and what it costs her to keep going, some of what it cost her just to put the struggle into words. All the other person could say is, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Of course I'll pray for your dad. I'll pray for you too."

At that moment, a promise was made. It's more than just "I'll be thinking about you;" it's a promise that should be taken seriously. (Unless you're okay with faith being little more than clichés and empty words that don't mean anything.)

How does one pray about something like that? What words can you say in the face of this kind of long, slow-burning tragedy, in which lives and souls unravel piece by piece and there is no sign of dawn?

Caring for someone with dementia is as close as it gets to the hardest kind of suffering—the kind that just happens. Nobody's fault; it just is. As far as we know, dementia isn't caused by exposure to asbestos or years of hard drinking. It just happens. Researchers are researching as hard as they can, but at this point there is simply no fix-it solution. To spew forth trite adages or cheery maxims is either irrelevant or downright cruel.

"Say a prayer for my dad, will you?..." So there are two conventional ways to pray: One asks for a miracle. "God, by the power with which you raised Jesus from the dead, restore this dear man in mind and body. Make him himself again and bring my friend the joy of a long and beautiful family life together." Not a bad prayer. It stems from love and arises from seeing how watching her father disintegrate before her eyes is breaking her heart. It is rooted in faith and a desire for God to show some compassion, to take some action. It's a good prayer.

Arriving at the emergency room, after Carol's stroke last weekend, this was the kind of prayer I offered. I took Carol's hand as her family circled up, and plead, "O God, make this go away. Heal. Restore. Bring back life and health as it was before." We pray for a cure and restored health. Why not? It's what we all wanted: just make this go away, or resolve it and give Carol strength and wholeness again. No way to pretend you're neutral on the matter. Why hide from God what your heart truly desires? There's no harm in asking.

Later, I left there to visit another patient in another hospital. This person has been battling cancer for nine years. The doctors have indicated he probably has less than a year left. Visiting him, I did not pray the same prayer as before. I didn't ask for a miracle healing. It just didn't feel like the right way to pray.

Laying hands on someone and fervently uttering, "heal!" feels too often like asking for something that is just not going to happen. "Make the results of the biopsy show the tumor to be non-malignant." It sets people up to be disillusioned and to conclude that the whole God-prayer-faith thing is a sham. It also carries a danger of adding guilt to the suffering. "He didn't get a miracle because you didn't have enough faith." I'll say that kind of prayer if that's what my friend wants, but only after we talk about it. We can ask for a miracle, but let's not paint God into a corner that demands a miracle or else.

"Say a prayer for my dad, will you. His dementia..." There's another kind of prayer for a time like this. This kind of prayer asks for God to be with this friend and her father. It remembers that Jesus, too, was broken, desolate, alone, on the brink of a slow painful death, and that Jesus understands. It accepts that suffering, and even death, is part of being human. Bodies and minds are fragile, frail, and sometimes feeble. Life isn't always easy, comfortable, or fun. But Christ understands. In Christ, we are not abandoned. We are never alone.

This kind of prayer goes, "God, in Jesus you shared our pain, our foolishness, and our sheer bad luck. You took on our flesh with all its needs and clumsiness and weakness. Be with my friend and her father now. Give them patience to endure what lies ahead; give them hope to get through every hard day, and friends to show them your love. Amen."

That first kind of miracle prayer expects God to do all the work. This prayer, especially the part, "Send them friends to show your love" sort of requires that the person praying do something. You be the answer to your prayer.

The friend already knows that the future for her father is bleak. What she is really asking for when she puts out her hand to clasp a supportive arm is, "Help me trust that I'm not alone in all of this. Praying that one not be abandoned, and then offering one's own presence is huge.

But it seems so little. So little and so limiting. So powerless and inadequate. It's a good prayer, an honest prayer. But is that all we dare ask? I'd like something more.

Maybe there's another kind of prayer. What the disciples saw on the mountain during Jesus's transfiguration may give us a glimpse. So let's call it a prayer of transfiguration.

Jesus took three of his followers with him, climbing to the summit of a nearby peak. They were being prepped for a "mountain-top experience." On the mountain, the disciples watched Jesus begin to talk with a couple of figures who

seemed to have been waiting for him there. These two figures somehow looked familiar, and the disciples soon recognized them as Moses and Elijah, the two greatest characters in the Old Testament. How did the disciples recognize Moses and Elijah—they'd lived hundreds of years before? Were they wearing name tags? Somehow the disciples saw something before their very eyes, but also saw something going on beyond what was going on before their very eyes. They realized something behind the something, something far more real than what was merely visible. There's more—soon after seeing Moses and Elijah, the disciples also heard the voice of God. There was a glimpse of a reality alongside reality, deeper than reality, and far more significant than reality.

"What happened on the mountain today, guys?" the other disciples asked later, a bit of pique in their tone at being left behind. "Oh, nothing much," replied James. "Jesus just needed to get away for a while, I guess. At the top, he started talking to himself." John interrupted, "Oh, no. That's what we thought at first, but then we realized he was talking to Moses and Elijah! I wouldn't call that 'nothing much'." "If you're going to tell what happened, tell the whole thing," Peter added. "That isn't all. We began to see Jesus for who he really is, far more than we'd known him before. And we actually heard God speaking to us!" They saw the thing beyond the thing and beyond the thing.

"Say a prayer for my dad, will you. His dementia..." Here's a third kind of prayer, a prayer of transfiguration. "God, in your son's transfiguration, we see a whole reality within and beneath and beyond what we thought we understood. In their times of bewilderment and confusion, show my friend and her father your glory, that they may find a deeper truth to their life than they ever knew. May they become closer than they've ever been, discover reasons for living beyond what they'd ever imagined, and be folded into your grace like never before."

That's a different kind of prayer. The miracle kind of prayer has a touch of defiance in it. But it is swathed in fantasy, I cannot deny that. The "presence" kind of prayer is honest and unflinching about reality, but it is a little too much bathed in tragedy. It misses any possibility of glory or goodness. It's a good, compassionate prayer, but it doesn't ask for enough.

The third kind of prayer—a transfiguration prayer--has the elements of the transfiguration story. There was a hard climb at high altitude. But there was more. There is the glory—the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus, which radiates. There is the glory of God's story through the history of Israel, a story that is most powerful in times of exile and the powerlessness of slavery. There is the loving, tender presence and heavenly voice of God the Father—a voice that, for the only time in their lives, the disciples hear and understand. And there is the extraordinary realization that, they have been with God.

That's the difference in the three prayers. The "miracle" prayer says, "Fix this and get it out of my life." The "presence" prayer asks, "I accept that You cannot change this, but be with me and share in my struggle, now and always." The "transfiguration" prayer is something more like, "Make my friend's trial and tragedy, her problem and pain, a glimpse of your glory. a window into life, when she can see your face, sense the mystery in all things. Bring her closer to you in this crisis than she ever has been in calmer times of greater strength and health. Make this a moment of truth, and when she cowers in fear and feels alone, touch her, raise her, and make her alive like never before."

That's a powerful prayer. It doesn't demand a miracle or even a solution, but it also doesn't cower helplessly in pain and tragedy. It asks for God to bring a story beyond the story that is all too apparent, a story that in truth, is more real and more life-giving than could have been told apart from the current situation.

It asks a lot of us, if we dare to pray that way. But it affirms a strong faith. It holds confidence that, like the disciples on the mount of transfiguration, we know that the work of God is going on beneath the surface. That work is not in jeopardy. Our joy, our meaning, our great honor, is to play a small part in it. Amen.