

WHY? WHY DO MY PRAYERS GO UNANSWERED?

1 Samuel 1:1-20

For many years, I faithfully prayed for the man God was preparing for me to wed. I had a very long list of characteristics I hoped for in a husband. Top of my list was that he needed to be a Christian, close behind he would need to get along with my family, my brothers in particular. The list went on and on filling one whole side of a loose-leaf paper. Daily, I prayed for God to raise up such a man for me. Then my 30th birthday was fast approaching and there was not a potential husband in sight. With great disgust, I shoved my prayer journal in a drawer and told God I was going to do this without His help!!

Three months later I was out for an evening of dancing at a local nightclub in Stowe, Vermont when this “tall dark handsome stranger” asked me if I would like to dance!! Without hesitating I made a beeline for the dance floor. We danced the rest of the night away only exchanging names as we went our separate ways. Two weeks later he came up to the ticket window at the movie theater where I worked nights and asked me out for a date to a Chubby Checker dance concert. We had a blast. When Vern dropped me off at my apartment, he asked if he could see me again. I said yes, but also felt obligated to let him know I was “sort of” seeing someone else. Totally unfazed, Vern quipped, “Well, may the best man win!”

That night, I knelt beside my bed and earnestly prayed. Lord, when I prayed for a husband all those years, this is not exactly what I had in mind! So, it must be from you! IF it is from you, Lord, I am going to ‘go for it,’ if not, please stop it now. We were married six months from the day we met.

Like most couples, our first year of marriage had its share of ups and downs. I was learning all about farm life and finding my way as a stepmother. Vern had a very clear traditional child-rearing philosophy and an equally traditional view of the role of a farm wife which I did not always share. Consequently, we would sometimes butt heads and after one such time, I maturely stomped off to our bedroom and unearthed my long-forgotten journal to pour out my heart. The last page I had written was my prayer for a husband with its list of characteristics. As I read over the lengthy list, it slowly dawned on me that God HAD answered my long-ago prayer. Vern had every single one of the characteristics and a few more I did not list!! My first reaction was one of complete awe that my husband, with whom I was highly annoyed, was exactly the kind of man I had asked for from God. My second reaction was to kick myself in the pants that I did not also ask God for a rich husband!!

Prayer – that often misunderstood and misused characteristic of the Christian walk. I would imagine most of you can relate to the following familiar scripture texts on some level when considering your prayer life. The first is from Psalm 22:2 – *O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer and by night but find no rest*; John 15:7 – *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you*; and finally, Matthew 26:39 – *Father if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done*.

In these three short verses we find; the anguished prayer of the Psalmist, the words of Jesus regarding prayer and finally Jesus’ own words in the garden of Gethsemane. Of the three, I think it is safe to say that the middle one from John 15 is the one that causes us most discomfort. How often, in your own prayer life, have you prayed your heart out with this verse ringing in your ears, *ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you*, yet your prayer does not seem to be answered? There could be any number of reasons for this, but first a real-life personal experience with prayer...

I was a newly professed Christian when some very well-meaning friends decided that God wanted to heal my hearing. I was invited to kneel in the middle of the group while they gathered around me, laid hands upon my head, neck, and ears, anointed me with oil and fervently prayed for my healing. What was God's response? How did God answer this prayer? More importantly – how did my “friends” respond to me as I popped my hearing aid back into where it belonged?

More on that later, first, we need to take a look at some misconceptions about prayer. Citing the scripture from John 15, Rev. Adam Hamilton relates the story of a woman desperate to have a child – after years of fertility treatments she finally conceived only to become extremely ill in the fifth month of her pregnancy. The doctor's informed her that if she continued to try and carry the child to term, she would not survive – while she was willing to take the risk, her family was not. An emergency C-section was performed and as feared, the baby was unable to survive outside the womb and died...while the mother lived.

In the mother's own words, “I had never before wrestled with the will of God. Now my life and faith depended upon it. I had always thought God could and would do anything if enough people prayed – but people had, and God did not. Who was God? What good is God?” The experience led this young woman to turn away from her faith and to stop believing in God. When all of this happened in her life, she was the pastor of a small church. Many people struggle with their faith because of God's apparent silence and apparent powerlessness when they cry out to him in their time of greatest need.

Then there are the seemingly frivolous, almost joking prayers that seem to be answered in a heartbeat – prayers for parking spaces and touchdown passes. While prayers for healing of cancer or the unborn child in this story go unheard. Just where is God in all of this? Why do some prayers seem to fall on deaf ears? Wendy Miller, one of my favorite seminary professors, often shared her childhood experience of prayer. As she sent up her fervent prayers to heaven, it often appeared that her prayers would get as far as the ceiling in the room then bounce back to her unanswered. I don't know about you, but I certainly can relate to this picture.

When you pray those prayers that come deep from within; when you pour out your heart to God, desperate to hear a word of encouragement or miraculous healing and it does not happen – what does this do to your faith journey? Jesus tells us in Matthew 21:21-22 – ***Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.*** What is your reaction to this text? Doesn't it seem to say that if we have faith, Jesus will do whatever we ask? It certainly seems that way to me and these are not the only words of Jesus that speak of prayer in this manner. So then, it makes perfect sense to me that we become confused and disillusioned when our prayers are seemingly unanswered.

God help us from the well-meaning Christian friends in our lives who pray with and for us!! When my hearing was not immediately restored, I popped my hearing aid back where it belonged only to be strongly chastised for not having faith enough to trust that God would, in time heal my hearing. I was further instructed to earnestly sit before God in a spirit of penitence just in case some unconfessed sin in my life was blocking my healing...Oh yes...sometimes the people closest to us do the most harm to our faith journey. This is what I call theological abuse and misuse of God's word. In looking at this warped logic the emphasis is placed upon the person praying – “if only I

have enough faith, if only **my** life is free from sin, if only **I** pray with the right motives, if only **I** say the exact words. This line of thinking puts the power of prayer on human beings, not on Christ. This line of thinking places the power of being worthy on the thoughts and actions of the person petitioning God. Tell me, is there ever a time when we are worthy; on our own steam, of God's attention, love, and grace? I think not. The Scriptures show us time and time again – e.g. the healing of blind Bartimaeus, the time Jesus stopped the funeral procession of a young boy and brought him back to life. Jesus does not act in our lives because **WE** are worthy and holy – Jesus acts in our lives because **Jesus is holy!!** (Hamilton, page 36).

Is it important to have faith? Does faith matter in our prayer life? It is and it does. Faith, but more importantly trust is the bedrock of prayer. Prayer is, fundamentally, an exercise in trust. Our prayers, of course, may not be answered in the ways we would prefer. Theologians have written volumes on how to understand this reality, and I will not attempt to summarize their findings. For me, it is helpful to remember what C.S. Lewis wrote about unanswered prayer in a letter to a friend: “If God had granted all the silly prayers I've made in my life, where would I be now?” Spiritual maturity involves trusting that God will answer our prayers according to our real needs as he sees them, and not as we, with limited vision, see them. After all, the ultimate goal of prayer is not to get our needs met or to get what we want; it is to draw us nearer to God.” (Dale A. Matthews).

Unfortunately, most Christians have a decidedly immature faith when it comes to unanswered prayer. Christian prayers have been reduced to a “wish list,” much like sitting on the lap of Santa Claus and telling him what you want for Christmas! God is not Santa Claus and further, God does not give us everything we think we need or want. When Jesus talks about having life and having it abundantly in John 10:9-11, Jesus is not talking about giving us every and anything we want. Jesus is talking about living the Christian life in the fullness of God's calling. By all means, pray for the things and stuff you want in this life – pray for that candy red apple Porsche, pray for the perfect parking spot, pray for your team to get a touch down – but don't be surprised when God answers your prayer with a beat-up old Buick, a parking spot as far from the entrance as you can get – and that touchdown??? Please remember that football is not and never will be a life and death issue!

God hearing and answering our prayers was dramatized in the 2003 film comedy *Bruce Almighty*, in which God is portrayed by Morgan Freeman. Jim Carrey plays the other main character, Bruce Nolan, a television field reporter in Buffalo, New York, who wants to be the anchorman. But when he is passed over for a promotion and some other things go wrong and he is then fired, Bruce takes out his frustration by claiming that God is “the one who should be fired.”

In response, God calls Bruce to a meeting, where God offers Bruce the divine powers. Bruce is initially jubilant, using these powers for personal gain and pleasure. But eventually, Bruce begins to hear voices in his head, and it's quite a cacophony. He again meets with God, who confronts Bruce about his selfish use of his powers and explains that the voices are prayers to God and that Bruce must deal with them. Bruce finds that the influx is far too great for him to handle – even though God had stated that he is only receiving prayers from the Buffalo area. So Bruce creates a computerized system to receive the prayers and sets the program to automatically answer yes to every petition. Bruce soon sees, however, that automatically granting everyone's prayer requests has plunged the city into chaos. So Bruce tries answering prayers manually as best he can. Of course, he can't handle that either, and he eventually asks God to take back his powers.

In our text this morning is the prayer of Hannah. Hannah desperately wanted a child of her own. In her polygamous marriage, she was the unquestioned favorite of her husband Elkanah. Still, no gift could satisfy her craving for the one thing she sought — a baby of her own. It was a crisis for any woman in Hannah's time, to have children was to be fully a woman. Not to have children was to be less than a woman and consequently an object of ridicule. It was considered a signal of God's disfavor. She knew it, and Peninnah, her rival wife, her enemy, knew it. Hence, Peninnah, who had babies, babies, and babies aplenty, needled, teased, provoked and harassed Hannah at every opportunity. Hannah was miserable inside and out. (Homiletics Online, 2003).

Since there were no fertility clinics, Hannah did the only thing she could do, and the one thing many childless women still do — she prayed to God with tears in her eyes and misery in her heart. She begged. She pleaded. She made a deal. Give me a baby and I'll give him back to you.

So there it is. Hannah's burden is heavy, and it is not lightened by her husband, the other woman or her pastor. But, in this case, it is lightened by God himself. Baby Samuel arrives, his name meaning in Hebrew, "I have asked him of the Lord."

How often do we try to make deals with God to find a way out of our troubles? Lord, do this for me, take away this problem, change this about my life, give me what I want, and I will do for you whatever you want. Well, God doesn't always give us what we want. God may have a better idea. For Hannah, the problem was solved. But for us, what if our problem isn't solved and can't be solved? What if a woman wants a baby but just won't ever have one? What then? What if the mill closes and there isn't any work but the bills keep coming? What then? What if your children hate you? What then?

What can be done about a situation that won't, can't and doesn't change, and which causes us to suffer? Long ago, Hannah had a big problem. So she suffered. In her suffering, she turned to God. In her case, God fixed the problem. In our cases — like terminal illness, debilitating sickness, unemployment or any other horror — sometimes there's just no fixing it. Sometimes there's no cure. But that doesn't mean there isn't healing, that doesn't mean God is absent or isn't listening or doesn't care. It may mean God's will for us is different from our will for ourselves. No matter what happens: God cares. God listens. God is present. God is loving.

God knows us thoroughly and loves us fully. God isn't like Peninnah, who exults in our pain. God doesn't give us suffering as punishment. That's what the story of Job is all about. God doesn't want us to suffer but sometimes we do suffer. Nature, life and just being a created human on this earth account for most of our troubles.

In two weeks, we will look at our human condition — the final sermon in this series on Why? And remember the ultimate goal of prayer is not to get our needs met or to get what we want; it is to draw us nearer to God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN