

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Barbara R. Cunningham, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, May 24, 2009, Easter 7, dedicated to the glory of God!

“Guided by Prayer”

John 17:6-19

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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I’m sure that those who are not here are worshipping in a church while they are away on vacation, aren’t you?

In our scripture today, Jesus is praying to God about who God has given him and what he gives us – the confidence that God is with us always.

Are there times in your life, as there are in mine, when you wonder where God is and how to “hear” answers to our prayers? Sometimes I just wait for a voice to answer me, yet the answers do not always come in a voice in the ear.

With the shock of deaths in our own family – our congregation – Lillian Brownfield, Melvin Koch and Jerome Dailey – some of us are reeling in pain and question. Yet in our faith, we know God is present!

I have been re-reading a book written by a friend of mine, Charles Shields, *Spiritual Survival Guide, How to find God When You’re Sick*. He wrote it when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer and offered it as a guide to others. In it, he describes what

we all need in our journey of faith and prayer, in doubt and pain. It reminded me of how we are guided in prayer – not in the ways we may expect, but ways we open our lives to. Answers may come to us in many different ways, and probably never a voice in our ear telling us exactly what the answer is.

Pause for a moment and pray a prayer of your own. Amen.

Did you ask for something? Did you thank God for what you have? Did you pray for someone else? What does prayer really do for us? We ask why does one person we pray for die of cancer, and the other one live.

There are many forms of prayer and answers: Sitting with someone who needs help or care; a gift to another; dance, songs, quiet, yes, even laughter! These can all be forms of prayer. Answers come in unique forms – sometimes in circumstances of our lives, changes that happen, the voice of a friend, in a sermon or talk given by someone who has studied something we have not thought about – and I'm sure you can think of ways when you just know something is right.

Sometimes we don't listen to the advice of others who know, and think God will protect us if we just ask. There was a basketball player in a high school who passed out on the basketball court. When he was revived, he went to his doctor who advised him that he could not play basketball again because of a severe condition of his heart. The player decided he felt fine, and he prayed to thank God for saving him the first time, and he was sure it wouldn't happen again. He played again, against the doctor's advice, and dropped dead on the court. Sometimes the doctors can be an answer to our prayers – God works in many ways through many people.

Do I believe in miracles? Yes. And I believe that we do not determine the miracles. I don't fully understand but I believe in a power unlimited – the only limitation is my limited vision.

So, what does prayer do for us?

- It quiets our frenetic lives.

When something happens, like a car accident, a child getting hurt, cutting your finger, getting married, someone dies – all of these things cause pain and sometimes panic. Prayer calms us down. Take a deep breath, and imagine God’s presence with you. Imaging is a form of prayer. We can take moments to calm and quiet our minds and open ourselves to receive the spirit. Prayer is for us to quiet our minds, our bodies, and to live better in the present with peace.

- Prayer opens our hearts to receive.

We often have decided that we know best what we want and need so we tell God what we want. Then when we don’t get what we ask for, we say God is not present, or we didn’t get an answer, or God didn’t hear our prayers. We keep telling God what we want, and we keep waiting to hear the answer we want.

Frederick Buechner, a great theologian, says, “God acts in history and in your and my brief histories, not as the puppeteer who sets the scene and works the strings, but rather as the great director who no matter what role fate casts us in, conveys to us somehow from the wings, if we have our eyes, ears, hearts open, and sometimes even if we don’t, how we can play those roles in a way to enrich and ennoble and hallow the whole vast drama of things, including our own small but crucial parts in it.”

- Prayer gives us the opportunity to examine our own motives.

A scene from *Shadowlands*, a film based on the life of C. S. Lewis, has Lewis returning to Oxford from London, where he has just married Joy Gresham, an American woman, in a private ceremony performed at her hospital bedside. She is dying from cancer, and through the struggle with her illness, she and Lewis have been discovering the depth of their love for each other.

As Lewis arrives at the college where he teaches, he is met by Harry Harrington, an Episcopal priest, who asks what news there is. Lewis hesitates. Then deciding to speak of the marriage and not the cancer, he says, “Ah, good news, I think, Harry. Yes, good news.” Harry, not aware of the marriage and thinking that Lewis would be praying for a miracle cure, says, “I know how hard you have been praying . . . Now God is answering your prayer.” Lewis replies, “That’s not why I pray, Harry. I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I’m helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn’t change God. It changes me!”

Prayer is not a message scribbled on a note, requesting what we want, stuffed in a bottle and tossed into the sea in hopes that it will wash up someday on God’s shoreline. It is identifying a need and waiting for an answer.

Do we truly mean what we say each Sunday in the Lord’s Prayer?

The first two lines are easy. Then we come to “Thy will be done.” What part of God’s will do we want done? Forgive us as we forgive others? Some of us would never be forgiven because we choose not to forgive others. Do we want to be judged and forgiven as we judge and forgive others? Maybe sometimes. How inclusive are we in that request? And of course, we want to be delivered from evil, even when we have stepped across the line into temptation. Only, I don’t think it is God leading us into temptation – to stretch the truth, to exclude others who are not exactly as we would like them to be, to cheat on our taxes, to say we could be different. Perhaps rather than saying “Why me?” we could say, “Okay, what next?” We learn as we live. God is with us all the way.

Prayer is communion with God. Prayer quiets us. If we are ready, prayer open our hearts to receive. Prayer gives us the opportunity to examine our motives to live what we pray about.

We speak to God, but God touches, embraces, shapes and changes us. Whether we pray for rain or pray for sunshine, our prayer is answered, because in the act of praying we receive the gift we really seek – intimacy with God.

Ann Weems writes, with my additions in italics:

“We don’t pretend to understand the mystery of *prayer* or of what goes on in God’s church. We just know we feel a pervading spirit of love that reaches into the niches of all of us and pulls us out into the open, free and alive and belonging. We believe this spirit of love exists because God’s spirit lives within this church, *and within each one of us*, this unity of persons trying to be the Good News.”

We see this church as a circle of persons holding hands, and dancing, and praying, supporting each other, accepting each other, loving each other. Each person in this dancing circle is facing outward, reaching into God’s world, listening for the whimpering, watching for the hurting, willing to offer a cup of cold water in God’s name. Sometimes they need the water, sometimes you need the water, sometimes I need the water. Being a part of the church means knowing that the cup is always filled in God’s name.

Let us pray:

God, we are open this moment to feel your presence. We quiet our minds, we open our hearts, and we let go of the motives to have something other than your love and support. Thank you, God, for your grace in our stumbling, your patience in our searching, your guidance in our stretching. Amen.

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