

“Taking Jesus Seriously but Not Literally”¹

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
Wausau First United Methodist Church, Wisconsin
January 14, 2018

Psalm 22:1-5

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.

To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

John 15:5-7

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

I read a story about two adult daughters who taking turns praying as their mother lay unmoving in a hospital bed. All day one or the other was by her side. The family’s pastor joined them late in the day. The daughter whispered to him, “I just can’t seem to get my prayers past the ceiling.”

This is the second sermon in our series asking “Why?” Last week we explored the question of innocent suffer and talked about the mistaken belief that God wills everything that happens. If you missed that message, I encourage you to go to First Church’s webpage and pull it up. This week we ask, “Why do prayers go unanswered?”

One of my favorite stories in the bible of prayers that are answered is Hannah’s prayer for a son. She’s accused of drunkenness but she’s simply praying as hard as she can. The next year, she gives birth to Samuel. We might forget that the bible also contains stories of unanswered prayer. As much as Moses begs God to let him lead the Israelites into the Promised Land, he doesn’t get to do it.

Many of us struggle with faith as we face God’s silence. Tim and Annie had two small children. One winter day grandma and grandpa were babysitting. While Donnie napped, Beth was sledding in the yard. She hit a tree and later died. Annie has been able to keep her faith. She and Donnie are active members of their church. But Tim comes only rarely. “I thought my faith was strong. I believed God could do anything if enough people prayed. But we prayed. Everyone in town prayed. And Beth died. What good is God?”

¹ For this sermon, I am indebted to Adam Hamilton for his book *Why? Making Sense of God’s Will*, 2011.

There are those who say God answers all their prayers. She says, “God made sure I had green lights all the way!” He points at the heavens after a touchdown. How can this be? God surely cares more about a child than a game.

People have struggled with questions about unanswered prayer forever. We can all remember times we faithfully prayed for someone or something and our prayers were unanswered.

Disappointment is defined as sadness or displeasure at unfulfilled expectations. In Mark’s gospel we read, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea’ and believes ... it’ll happen (11:23). In our lesson today we hear, if you remain in me and my words in you, ask whatever you *want and it’ll be done.”

Sometimes well-meaning people tell us that the problem /*is our prayer. We’re not working to please God... we’re not confessing our sin... we lack faith... our motives are wrong... This is just wrong!

I remember the story of a man who came begging Jesus to heal his son. Jesus didn’t ask about his motives or his faith. He didn’t mention the man’s sin. He just said, go home. Your son’s fine (Jn 4:49-51). That’s just one of many similar stories. The father didn’t have to be holy. Jesus was holy; that was enough.

The bible shows us a God who wants wholeness for us. It’s not wrong to ask for what we need. But when we wonder why God doesn’t answer, understanding our own assumptions can help.

Hyperbole is an exaggeration to make a point. If a child exclaims, ‘I’ll die if I don’t get a Smartphone!’ we don’t put paramedics on speed-dial. Have you ever really seen someone pinch pennies?

Jesus regularly uses hyperbole to make his point. It’s how prophets and 1st century teachers talk. The problem is that the 1800s, people started teaching the idea of biblical literalism. Many of us have gotten away from this mistaken idea, but it can still leave us confused and disappointed.

I remember my high school Sunday school teacher’s long explanation about how it really could be easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God’s kin-dom (Mark 10:25). Then there’s “when you give to the poor, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand’s doing” (Mt 6:3) and speaking of hands, “if your hand causes you to sin, chop it off” (Mk 9:43). Each of these is impossible, or at least unreasonable.

In the custom of his time, Jesus speaks this way for emphasis – one sentence and done but easy to remember. Knowing this, let’s examine our lesson again, “If you remain in me and my words in you, ask whatever you want and it’ll be done ...” Shall we take this literally or shall we understand that Jesus is inviting us to pray boldly? In case it helps your decision, this is the same passage where Jesus says, “I am the vine and you are the branches,” and “Mountain, go into the sea.”

One aspect of hyperbole is that whatever’s said isn’t logically possible. This is how people know it’s a figure of speech. Jesus’ early listeners know this. Part of our problem may be that we’re so used to Jesus’ miraculous feats that we assume this is part of that. So this leaves us feeling like God doesn’t keep promises.

We want Jesus to mean his words literally. Or do we? Since I can’t move mountains, I must not have enough faith. But thinking of prayers I’m glad weren’t answered – jobs that didn’t work

out, crushes on people who are no longer part of my life – Garth Brooks’ song comes to mind; sometimes we might “thank God for unanswered prayers.”

Once again, we’re reminded that God works within the systems of creation. And most of the time, we can be glad for it. I’d feel guilty if I actually threw a mountain into the sea. I wouldn’t want to keep an employer or companion against their will.

Still, if prayer would have healed my dad, or little Beth... I believe in this kind of prayer yet I’m also aware that our fearfully and wonderfully made bodies are also fragile. We need to take care of ourselves. I don’t believe Jesus intended to suggest that miraculous healing take the place of self-care. If he had meant his words literally, there would be no need for humans to work for... anything. That can’t be what he meant.

Let’s look at two NT stories of unanswered prayers. In the apostle Paul’s second letter to the startup church in Corinth, he writes about his “thorn in the flesh.” We don’t know what the ailment is; Paul never specifies. But he does share that three times he’s asked God to heal this ailment. All Paul’s received in reply is the reminder that God’s grace is sufficient and that God’s power is perfected in his weakness.

We might say, “This is an answer?” but Paul finds the comfort in it he needs in order to continue God’s work in his life.

The second NT story of unanswered prayer comes from the Garden of Gethsemane. After supper with his disciples, Jesus goes there to pray. Soon soldiers will come to arrest him. He prays, “Father, take this cup from me” (Lk 22:42). The cup is the suffering he will endure as he’s tormented and then executed the following day. “God, please, don’t make me face this.” God does not deliver him from events. And as Jesus hangs on the cross, he feels God’s perceived absence. He prays, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Of course, God did not forsake him. God does not always answer prayers, even when we are in greatest need, yet God does not abandon us. And God works through all that happens. As Paul depends upon God to be his strength, his faith deepens and countless others find faith through him. Jesus’ willingness to face crucifixion is the most powerful symbol the world knows of God’s sacrificial love. Through this act, we come to accept God’s saving work for all of creation.

Before we finish, a few last questions and thoughts...

How does God answer prayers? Last week we talked about how God gives humankind the task of taking care of everything. We were reminded that in every situation we choose how we respond. We learned that God’s primary way to connect with creation, God’s chief way of answering prayers, is through people. The bible and our lives indicate that while God may use miracles occasionally, most often God works through people, calling and nudging us to be the good someone or something needs.

What’s the purpose of prayer? Most of what we’ve been talking about today is the intercessory, asking-God-for-something kind of prayer.

“Maybe thinking of prayer as something that needs to be ‘answered’ is asking the wrong question. Maybe prayer is something like ‘entering into a relationship’ or ‘yielding to God.’ [Maybe it’s] less of a transaction [and] more of an investment or even a communion.”²

² From “Jim,” in *Why?*, 52.

Sometimes, after I've talked to God about my day and lifted up my concerns for this person and that one, I just crawl into God's lap – metaphorically speaking – and rest there in God's embrace.

As for the last question I was going to ask – what should we pray for? – I changed my mind. I tried to give up should-ing years ago, and I invite you to do the same. *Should* is about someone else's idea of what's the right thing to do. While we all benefit from hearing other perspectives – something we talked about during Wednesday's *Making Sense of the Bible* – in the end we need to trust ourselves and trust God.

Trust that God wants to be a close and regular part of your days and your nights. That God knows your needs and hopes, even if you don't voice them. And pray. You'll be better for it – a better you, having more hope, more peace, and more love.