

## ***Prayer Changes***

Luke 9:28-36

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Let's talk about prayer.

I mean, prayer changes things, right? After all, that's what prayer is. We present our requests to God and God responds. God answers prayer. We've known this since Sunday school.

But it also raises some sticky questions. Like, does God change his mind? If God responds to prayer, does that mean she alters her sovereign plan in response to our requests? Or is God like the ultimate chess player answering prayers by outsmarting the devil, the universe, fate, karma, or whatever else he has to outsmart?

Scripture supports the notion that prayer does not change things: God has sovereign plans, is omnipotent and omnipresent (ie. Isaiah 46:9-10, Jeremiah 25:11-12).

Scripture also makes it clear that prayer changes things (ie. James 5:13-15, 2 Chronicles 6:40)

Hmmmm, this is a little confusing. Let's see what today's story of the transfiguration in Luke's gospel has to teach us.

The story tells us that Peter, John and James have accompanied their friend and teacher up the mountain for a time apart. Luke explains that Jesus' withdrawal to the mountain was for the purpose of prayer.

The three disciples have been sleeping while Jesus prayed. However, they roused themselves in time to witness the uncreated light of life shining forth from Jesus, while he was in the depths of prayer. That light has been there all along. But now, in this moment on the mountain, Peter, James and John receive the stunning gift of seeing the truth of their friend's being. They see his glory.

This transfiguration bears witness to the true identity of Jesus. By God's action in the transformation itself and in the words of the voice from heaven. Jesus is declared to be the chosen Son of God.

I think this signals the importance for us to be clear about *our* identity of followers of Jesus. We are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Just as God, the voice from the cloud declared, "Listen to him!" we are called to do the same. What do we learn from the gospels about what it means to listen to Jesus? How do we seek to embody Jesus' teaching and walk in his ways?

Our own prayer life can serve to reveal our true identity. Not only are we followers of Jesus, we are beloved children of God, created by God and profoundly gifted. We can realize that these God-given gifts are meant not just for ourselves, but for others.

The disciples see two men speaking with Jesus who are identified as Moses and Elijah. The three were speaking of Jesus' exodus (or departure) which is usually interpreted in this passage to refer to the fate which awaits him – his suffering, death and resurrection in Jerusalem.

Perhaps Moses and Elijah were providing encouragement for Jesus for these difficult tasks which awaited him. Jesus knew what his mission was, and what needed to be accomplished. In the face

of suffering, rejection and death, Jesus knew what needed to be accomplished and was resolute in fulfilling his redemptive mission. He would cooperate with God's will of love and freedom, peace and justice, wholeness and fullness of life **for all**. For these reasons, the transfiguration bears witness to the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ.

We must likewise be people who are resolute in our mission. How are we being called individually and as a community of faith to share our God-given gifts? How do we intentionally orient our life – our collective lives – to cooperate with God's will of love and freedom, peace and justice, wholeness and fullness of life **for all**?

Luke underscores the power of prayer to mediate the presence of God. But God's presence isn't meant just for the benefit of Jesus, just as it isn't meant just for the benefit of the one who prays. When we have an active prayer life, we grow in spiritual maturity. We recognize that in God's presence we are formed and re-formed to carry out God's mission and ministry in the world.

Peter, James and John were still at a point of spiritual immaturity. They didn't understand the full significance of what was unfolding on that mountaintop. They simply were stuck at the point of trying to hold onto the presence of Moses and Elijah, to hold onto their experience of beholding God's glory! And who could blame them. That is pretty incredible stuff. And yet, that is not what they were being called to do. The very next day after their encounter with Glory, when they had come down from the mountain, they were met by a great crowd needing their time, attention and healing. Spiritual high points are often followed by the hard reality of challenging ministry. The crowds will always be waiting. The needs of the world are great. There will always be ministry to do. This side of eternity, God's mission on earth will continue, and disciples will be needed.

This is exactly why we need prayer. Our spiritual formation is ongoing, it never ends. For that reason, it isn't easy. The pattern of Jesus' prayer life instructs his disciples and the church and us. He uses moments of prayer to stay close to God, to reconnect to the source of love, strength and power in order to live out the mission and ministry to which he'd been called – despite the challenges and obstacles.

The same is true for us. In God's presence, we're formed and reformed to carry on Jesus' mission and ministry. Prayer is not just for our personal benefit. It connects us to the past and to the future and to others across time and space. Deep prayer always opens us to loving action.

We so often resist spiritual formation. It requires self-discipline, consistent action and a willingness to enter into mystery. God wants a relationship with us, to mature our faith and to help accomplish God's will and mission in the world.

This Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, begins the liturgical season of Lent. This marks the 40 days (excluding Sundays) leading up to Easter. In our Christian tradition, Lent is often a period of fasting (or sacrifice), almsgiving (the practice of giving money or food to people who are poor) and prayer.

It is a wide-spread practice to "give something up" for Lent which embraces the idea of fasting or sacrifice. We're certainly invited to embrace this practice.

There are always many opportunities to give money or food since food insecurity is extremely high, especially in our capital city of Hartford. This church collects food items for the West Hartford food pantry on a weekly basis. With the financial support of the Outreach Team, the

youth assemble brown bag lunches on a monthly basis for Loaves & Fishes, the soup kitchen at Immanuel UCC up the road. Money is given to South Park Inn, a shelter in Hartford, and Hands on Hartford which has a few different feeding programs and more. We're currently planning for a Harvest Pack event when the whole church will be invited to come together to assemble thousands of meals to be distributed to people who are hungry.

Today, I really want to encourage our spiritual formation by focusing on our prayer life this Lenten season. The mountaintop was not a peaceful experience for Peter, James and John. They were terrified and overwhelmed with the glory and grandeur of God. However, the disciples didn't pray with Jesus, they fell asleep! It isn't the only time they fall asleep when Jesus invites them to pray. We know the same happened in the Garden of Gethsemane the night of Jesus' betrayal and the eve of his death. This is a reminder for us to be a people of prayer – or at least people who *try* to pray.

Just as the disciples were terrified by the cloud which overshadowed them, we have a high level of discomfort with mystery... of not knowing, of not having things all figured out. God can never be totally known. God also cannot be manipulated, controlled or predicted.

What kind of an invitation is this, then? It is an invitation to step into the mystery of God and comes from people of faith over many centuries.

Spanish Catholic Priest and mystic John of the Cross tells us that God is so beyond our comprehension, so beyond our senses that entering into God's presence is, in fact, entering into a thick darkness which is beyond sight, sound and feel.

The book of Genesis tells us of Abram being enveloped in darkness and entering a trance in God's presence.

Theresa of Avila noted in her book *The Interior Castle* that we're so small and insignificant in comparison to the grandeur of God... and yet, to experience such an encounter (with God) is a gift.

A young unknown mystic in the 16<sup>th</sup> century wrote a book entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing* which serves as a spiritual guide on contemplative prayer. The underlying message suggests that the way to know God is to abandon consideration of God's particular activities and attributes and be courageous enough to surrender one's mind and ego to the realm of "unknowing" at which point one may begin to glimpse the nature of God.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes that we do not know how to pray as we ought.

There are so many ways to pray. And maybe what I've said here makes you as confused as ever! I am convinced that it is less important which prayer practice or technique is used, and more important that we commit to daily prayer. Try it as an experiment during Lent.

Maybe set an alarm for 10-15 minutes. Read and reflect on Scripture. Gaze at an image like the one in today's Sunday notes. There is so much sacred art to choose from, or choose some other symbol or image. Walk the labyrinth. Write a letter to God. Or write yourself a letter from God. Upon waking and before sleep, intentionally make a mental list of the things for which you're grateful. Try meditation or centering prayer. It might be agonizing the first few times because we cannot sit still! If you're a parent with children at home, perhaps pray as a family. If you'd like

other ideas, talk with me! There are endless resources to guide you. The point is to seek to grow as we deepen our encounters with God in prayer.

I think what really happens is that over time, as we grow in our prayer life, we also grow in spiritual maturity. In the end, it is less about prayer changing things and more about the change which occurs in the one who prays. More importantly, deep prayer always opens us to loving action.

God is God who is infinitely above us, and his ways are most certainly NOT our ways. How could we *possibly* think that we could comprehend the workings of the One who sustains all things by the power of her word.

I know two things, and both give me immense comfort.

First: our good God rules, controls and ordains all things for our good and God's glory.

Second: God invites us to pray and promises to respond.

That's enough for me.

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