

## PRESUMPTUOUS PRAYER

Scriptures: Exodus 32:7-14; Luke 18:1-8

Here is the question of faith for this week: How does prayer work? Isn't it presumptuous of mere mortals to expect God's actions to change because of our pleas?

Yes it is presumptuous. But that does not stop people in the Bible from doing it, especially Moses. For an example, turn with me to our second scripture lesson: Exodus 32:7-14 (OT, p. 78). While Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the people of Israel were down in the valley breaking them. And that is where our scripture reading begins.

(Read Exodus 32:7-14)

There is a wonderful story by Fred Craddock in his book *Craddock Stories*, from which I have quoted before. He tells of meeting a woman at the hospital who was banging on the door to the chapel with both fists, crying, "Let me in! Let me in!" Apparently in the past the chapel had been trashed by kids that were running around the hospital, so it was locked whenever it was not in used. But Fred Craddock got a key and let the woman in. He writes,

She had the look of desperation. She had the voice of desperation. I can't tell you if she was screaming or crying or moaning or what it was, but it was desperation. [She was saying] "I know he's going to die, I know he's going to die."

"Who?"

"My husband."

"What's the matter?"

"He's had a heart attack." ...

I told her who I was, and I said, "Can I pray with you?" And she said "Please."

I started to pray for her and for her husband, and she interrupted me. She didn't just interrupt me; she took over. She started praying herself and stopped my prayer. I think maybe I was too quiet or too slow or saying the wrong thing or something. Anyway, my prayer wasn't getting there, and she knew it. So she said, "Lord, this is not the time to take my husband. You know better than I do, he's not ready. Never prays, never goes to church or anything. He's not ready; not a good time to take him. Don't take him now. And what about me? If I have to raise these kids, what am I going to do? I don't have any skills, can't find any work. I quit school to marry him. If I'd known you were going to take him I'd have stayed in school." She was really talking to God. "And what about the kids? They don't mind me now with him around. If he's gone, they'll be wild as bucks. What about the kids? This is not the time to take my husband." ...

She was desperate. She had God by the lapels, both hands, and was screaming in God's face: "I don't think you're listening!" (pp. 110-111).

An interesting way to talk to God, don't you think? Is that presumptuous? Is that impertinent? Well, look at the example of Moses. When the people of Israel forsake the Lord to worship a golden calf, God says to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt have acted perversely." Did you notice how that was worded? When

I was young and got into trouble, my mother would say to my father, “Do you know what your son did?” At that moment I was not her son; I was his son. God says to Moses, “Do you know what your people did? They have fashioned a golden calf and are worshiping it instead of me.”

Then God says to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn against them....” Isn’t that an interesting statement? God tells Moses to let him alone. God has decided to burn up the people of Israel, and God doesn’t want Moses bothering him about it or trying to change his mind.

But Moses prays. He is much more diplomatic than the woman in Fred Craddock’s story, but he is definitely trying to persuade God. In verse 12 Moses says, “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains and consume them from the face of the earth?’” In effect Moses says to God, “If you destroy the people of Israel now, it will damage your reputation. Everyone knows that the Israelites are your people. If you can’t take care of them, people will think you are not much of a God.” If that is not a presumptuous way to talk to God, what is?

But Moses isn’t finished. In the next verse he says to God, “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” Moses says that if God destroys Israel God will be renegeing on God’s own promises.

How does God react to that? Does God slap down Moses for his impertinence? No. Verse 14: “And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he had planned to bring on his people.” God listens to this tirade by Moses and says, “Gosh, I guess you’re right. I hadn’t thought of it that way. Maybe I shouldn’t do that.”

After Fred Craddock’s prayer with the woman at the hospital, he saw her again the next day, and he writes, “She was in the hallway outside intensive care. Before I could ask, she said, ‘He’s better.’ She smiled and said, ‘I’m sorry about that crazy woman yesterday.’ I said, ‘Well, you weren’t crazy.’ She said, ‘I guess the Lord heard one of us.’ I said, ‘He heard you’ (p. 111).

Last week I said that healing is not something we can manipulate God to give. And that is true. But that does not mean we should not pray for it. Yes, prayer is presumptuous. Nothing is more presumptuous than to think that we lowly human beings can tell God how to run the universe. But God invites it. God welcomes it. God encourages us to do just that.

There is a wonderful example in our first scripture lesson. Jesus tells a parable about a widow who keeps banging on the door of an unjust judge until he gives her a hearing. Then Jesus says that is how you should pray, like the woman in the story banging on the doors of the chapel, “Let me in. Let me in,” or like Moses pulling out his best arguments and even daring to lay a guilt trip on God. Prayer is supposed to be presumptuous; it is supposed to be daring. Because that is God’s way of letting us participate in God’s work in the world.

C. S. Lewis once made this observation. He said that if you wonder why you should pray, you might also wonder why you should do anything. God can certainly put food on the table or clothes on your back without your help. Remember one of Jesus' parables. He says, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." Then he says, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." God does not need our help to feed and clothe people. So why should we work?

Because work is the way God allows us to participate. God does not need us in order to do anything. But God dignifies us by letting us be the means—the hands, so to speak—of God's work in the world. And the same is true of our prayers. God dignifies our prayers by allowing them to make a difference. That is how prayer works. God genuinely listens when we pray, just like to Moses, just like to the woman in Fred Craddock's story. God let's our prayers make a difference, just like our work makes a difference.

Prayer works by changing things. It changes God, and it changes us. Anne Lamott once said, "Courage is fear that has said its prayers." Prayer changes things. It changes God, and it changes us.

Let me close with one of the best descriptions of prayer I have ever read. This is from Fred Buechner's book *Wishful Thinking*. He says,

According to Jesus, by far the most important thing about praying is to keep at it. The images he uses to explain this are all rather comic, as though he thought it was rather comic to have to explain it all. He says God is like a friend you go to borrow bread from at midnight. The friend tells you in effect to drop dead, but you go on knocking anyway until he finally gives you what you want so he can go back to bed again (Luke 11:5-8). Or God is like a crooked judge who refuses to hear the case of a certain poor widow, presumably because he knows there's nothing much in it for him. But she keeps hounding him until finally he hears her case just to get her out of his hair (Luke 18:1-8). ... Be importunate, Jesus says—not, one assumes, because you have to beat a path to God's door before he'll open it, but because until you beat the path maybe there's no way of getting to *your* door. ...

What about when the boy is not healed? When, listened to or not listened to, the prayer goes unanswered? Just keep praying, Jesus says. Remember the sleepy friend, the crooked judge. Even if the boy dies, keep beating the path to God's door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer the God you call upon will finally come, and even if he does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for (pp. 70-71).

That, friends, is how prayer works.

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