

Sermon: Pentecost 2

The Rev. Mike Wernick

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Year C

1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-43

Psalm 96:1-9

Galatians 1:1-12

Luke 7:1-10

Do we anguish over God's will for us... when we come to a fork in the road... do we take it... and if we go to the left... but there's something over to the right that would benefit us... do we believe... or fear... that God will never invite us around to that one...

When we pray to discern God's will for us... are there right words to say... are some better than others... do we need to pray in tongues... should we sit down... kneel... or stand up to make the words of our hearts more effective... is five minutes enough... ten... do we need twenty... or is maybe just a moment... just an impulse of concern or desire... as it emerges into our awareness... does that impulse last long enough for God to hear us...

How is it different if we pray alone at home... or here in community... or with two thousand others... and who do we pray for... those we deem worthy... those who pray for us... those for whom no one prays... do we pray for our enemies too...

And how do we intercede for those we've never met... how do we pray for those who are strangers... do we need to find out what's going on so we know just exactly what to pray for... or does that matter since God already knows... since we reject works righteousness... are there some people who are not deserving... if the fruits of our prayer are different than what we expect... different from what we hoped... do we think we haven't prayed correctly... do we conclude that God hasn't heard us... or that we're not worthy enough... do we ask God to give others what we really want God to give us... do we pray they'll convert... or see the light... or agree with us...

St. Francis of Assisi said: *preach the Gospel constantly... use words when necessary...* and we're familiar with the idea from the letter of James that faith without works is dead... so can we pray without acting... or must some kind of action... at least some of the time... accompany our prayers...

In today's reading from 1 Kings... in the presence of the assembly... and in the omitted verses (24 - 40)... Solomon lists seven different occasions for prayer... asserts seven times... that although the Temple is the place where one prays to God... God dwelling place is in heaven... and even there... God hears even the foreigner... even the one who is considered an outsider... maybe some of the Israelites thought you had to be one of them... for God to listen to you... but Solomon affirms that God hears everyone...

In the summer of 1993... I participated in a group experiment... where I was a kind of stranger... I was living in Fairfield, Iowa at the time... practicing Transcendental Meditation... meditating twice a day with about 2,000 others in community... the scientific research on brain functioning that was being done at that time... suggested that deep meditation... deep silence... increased brain coherence... and that this increased coherence began in the individual... but radiated out into the environment... and it was decided to put this theory to the test...

Between June 7 and July 30 that summer... for about seven weeks... between 800 and 4,000 people meditated together in one large indoor space... in Washington DC... before our arrival... violent crime had been steadily increasing during the first five months of the year... and before our arrival... the leaders publicized the event and its anticipated outcome... more social orderliness and a 20% decrease in crime... Washington's Chief of Police said that the only thing that would decrease crime by that much would be 20" of snow... but a week or so after we began... homicides... rapes... and aggravated assaults... measured by the FBI... began decreasing and continued to drop until the end of the experiment... in the end... the greatest measured decrease

was 23.3%... statisticians said that the probability of this being a chance variation in crime... was less than 2 in 1 billion...

I can't prove this connection between cause and effect... this experiment in group consciousness... but I believe it speaks to truth... and today's reading from the Gospel reminded me about it... it reminded me about the power of community...

A man who understands authority... wants his servant to be healed... he sends messengers to Jesus with his request... they try to convince him why the Centurion is worthy... he loves our people... he built the synagogue for us... and apparently Jesus is convinced because he goes... but even before he gets there... the Centurion sends others who speak for him: *No. No. Don't come. I'm not worthy to have you under my roof...*

Let's remember that Luke's Gospel was written after the destruction of the Temple... after the Roman Empire had already given Luke plenty of reasons not to paint the Centurion... or any Roman in a positive light... but through Luke... Jesus says about a foreigner... a foreigner who God also hears: *not even in Israel have I found such faith!*

And it's easy I think for us to limit Jesus' comment just to the Centurion... to believe that Jesus was talking only about him... but I think Jesus' observation was directed towards the Centurion's community too... to the faith exhibited by all those who rallied to assist him and his servant... how this community made what was important to one man... equally if not more important to all of them... and how it may have been their collective consciousness that effected this healing...

Pastor Fred Niedner wrote: *we witness complex negotiations about coming or not coming to the Centurion's home... but oddly... by the end of the story a person is healed whom Jesus himself never lays eyes on. Indeed... Jesus never even meets the centurion... much less his slave... nor does he declare anyone healed. We have here*

some sort of lesson about how friends and communities handle illnesses and other perilous plights among their number... Pastor Niedner adds: more than anything... it seems... the community's faith has made him well...

I'm confident... that the power of human consciousness has not yet been realized... that we don't use all of our mental potential... but I'm also confident that prayer must at least sometimes... be accompanied by action... otherwise we fall back into magical thinking... believing that our prayers are stronger than the actions we could take... like when some people say: *Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families...* and simply... maybe ignorantly believing that's enough... or that's all the situation requires... or when people... like my cousin who died this week from Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy... continue to die because we collectively promote competition and like our modern Gladiator games more than we like protecting each other...

So it seems to me... that when one person gets sick... or has surgery... or is working through some difficult family stuff... it affects a whole community... and the more we keep it to ourselves... the harder it'll be for us to heal... or recover... or find reconciliation... but when we fold others in... and ask for help... when others bear our burdens... we learn a lesson about how friends and communities handle illnesses and other challenges among our members...

So on the one hand... it's not just the mind of Christ we seek... so that God will hear our prayer more clearly... God already hears us... and on the other hand... it's not just learning to put our prayers into action... to speak up or right a wrong or advance social or environmental justice... but it's both... so when you come to a fork in the road... do you take it...

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