

Stories of Prayer

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – February 8, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

2 Chronicles 1:7-12

⁷That night God appeared to Solomon, and said to him, “Ask what I should give you.” ⁸Solomon said to God, “You have shown great and steadfast love to my father David, and have made me succeed him as king. ⁹O LORD God, let your promise to my father David now be fulfilled, for you have made me king over a people as numerous as the dust of the earth. ¹⁰Give me now wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before this people, for who can rule this great people of yours?” ¹¹God answered Solomon, “Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked for possessions, wealth, honor, or the life of those who hate you, and have not even asked for long life, but have asked for wisdom and knowledge for yourself that you may rule my people over whom I have made you king, ¹²wisdom and knowledge are granted to you. I will also give you riches, possessions, and honor, such as none of the kings had who were before you, and none after you shall have the like.”

Acts 9:36-43

³⁶Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, “Please come to us without delay.” ³⁹So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

This week, we continue our six-week series on prayer: A Life of Prayer. Today, we consider two contrasting stories of prayer. The first is about a prayer for wisdom, not unlike a prayer that many of us might pray. The second is about a prayer and a woman returned to life!

A prayer for wisdom

As King David approached his death, he named his son, Solomon, to succeed him as Israel's king. Solomon would take Israel to its greatest heights of wealth and political power. Solomon would build the LORD'S temple in Jerusalem, a temple that would stand for nearly four centuries. But before all this, Solomon assembled the people of Israel at the tabernacle, the moveable dwelling place of God that would be replaced by Solomon's temple. There, during several days of ritual, God appeared to

Teresa of Avila

'a busy frantic life'

How is it, my God, that you have given me this hectic busy life when I have so little time to enjoy your presence. Throughout the day people are waiting to speak with me, and even at meals I have to continue talking to people about their needs and problems. During sleep itself I am still thinking and dreaming about the multitude of concerns that surround me. I do all this not for my own sake, but for yours. To me my present pattern of life is a torment; I only hope that for you it is truly a sacrifice of love. I know that you are constantly beside me, yet I am usually so busy that I ignore you. If you want me to remain so busy, please force me to think about and love you even in the midst of such hectic activity. If you do not want me so busy, please release me from it, showing how others can take over my responsibilities.

Though she joined a Carmelite monastery at a young age, her early adult years were a time of spiritual and physical torment. Beginning at age forty, however, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) had a series of powerful ecstatic experiences, leading to what she understood to be a mystical marriage to Christ. Teresa worked tirelessly to found a new order of Carmelites and passed on to us journals and prayers from her spiritual journey. Teresa worked alongside John of the Cross (see pg. 2) in much of her reformation of the Carmelites.

Solomon and said, “What can I give you?” Now, I don’t know what I might have asked of God, but I fear I might not have been as mature as Solomon. He did not ask for more stuff or more money or better health or a long life. Instead, Solomon asked for the wisdom and knowledge to rule well. And God gave him as he asked. Indeed, God gave much more to Solomon than he even asked for!

The wisdom for which Solomon prayed was not political astuteness or common sense or street smarts. Wisdom in the Bible is knowing the way of God. Wisdom is the way of the righteous and the upright. The wise king would be a king who knows and does the moral will of God. We grow in wisdom as we come to know God, loving him and loving our neighbor. In this opening chapter of 2 Chronicles, Solomon is a model of spirituality; his prayers and his will conform to the will of God. Solomon seems already to possess that which he prays for – wisdom. Perhaps, there are times when God has already given us what we seek . . . we need only discover that it is so.

A prayer for healing

Our second story of prayer is from the book of Acts and it contrasts sharply with the story of Solomon’s prayer. Here, in Acts 9, Luke takes us from Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus to Peter’s ministry in Judea.¹ First, we are told that Peter went to the town of Lydda where he healed Aeneas, a man who had been bedridden for eight years, causing many people to become followers of Jesus.

Tabitha lived in nearby Joppa² and devoted herself to serving others, particularly widows. Widows led a hard life in ancient cultures; they needed all the help that Tabitha could provide. She worked so hard for the widows, running from one place to another, that she earned the nickname, the

“gazelle.” When Tabitha fell ill and died, the widows were terrified – who would look after them? It seems that Peter’s reputation as a healer was widespread, for Tabitha’s friends sent for Peter, thinking that he can raise the dead! When Peter arrived, he was met by the widows who showed him garments that Tabitha had made, tangible evidence of Tabitha’s charity. Going upstairs, Peter asked everyone to leave the room. Alone with the body, Peter knelt and prayed.

We don’t know the content of Peter’s prayer, but we don’t really need to. From beginning to end, the Bible is filled with the stories of “prayer-ers.” David prays for forgiveness. Solomon prays for wisdom. Elijah throws himself across the body of a dead boy and prays that God would revive him. On the eve of his death, Jesus prays that another path forward might open for him. In Joppa, Peter prays that that Tabitha might be returned to life and she is! This is not magic; it is God’s power at work through Peter’s close communion with his Lord.

Sometimes we are tempted to view such miraculous answers to prayer as those rare occasions when God (whom we mistakenly think of as a sort of absentee landlord) chooses to intervene in the natural order of life. But this is not the biblical view. Instead, God is active and caring in the world, in our lives, every day and in all ways. Prayer is not a once-in-awhile request. Peter lived in unceasing conversation with God, confident that God listens and loves and acts.

John of the Cross

‘reveal yourself’

I no longer want just to hear about you, beloved Lord, through messengers. I no longer want to hear doctrines about you, nor to have my emotions stirred by people speaking of you. I yearn for your presence. The messengers simply frustrate and grieve me, because they remind me of how distant I am from you. They reopen the wounds in my heart, and they seem to delay your coming to me. From this day onwards please send me no more messengers, no more doctrines, because they cannot satisfy my overwhelming desire for you. I want to give myself completely to you. And I want you to give yourself completely to me. The love which you show in glimpses, reveal to me fully. The love which you convey through messengers, speak it to me directly. I sometimes think you are mocking me by hiding yourself from me. Come to me with the priceless jewel of your love.

John was a young friar when he first met Teresa of Avila. Under her influence, he set out to restore the primitive simplicity of the first friars. His work was not always well-received. He was sometimes imprisoned, where he wrote some of his finest mystical and devotional works.

¹These events take place perhaps three or so years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

²This is modern-day Jaffa and is part of metropolitan Tel Aviv, on the shores of the Mediterranean.

Daily Bible Readings

(some other stories of prayer)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Exodus 34:1-9 After Moses smashes the tablets of stone, God gives Moses new tablets and renews the covenant.</p>	<p>Day 2 1 Samuel 1:1-2:10 Hannah prays to God for a son</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Chronicles 29 David collects offerings for the construction of the temple that his son, Solomon, will build. David prays to the Lord.</p>	<p>Day 4 Matthew 26:36-46 Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane. He prays that there might be another path forward for him, but submits himself to God's will.</p>
<p>Day 5 Acts 9:1-19 Saul (Paul!) encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus. ["Saul" (Hebrew) and "Paul" (Greek) are the same name in two languages.]</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Are You Part of a Sunday Morning Class?

Sunday School classes have always been a vital part of United Methodism. At St. Andrew we offer a wide variety of adult classes on Sunday morning. There are nearly twenty different classes! Whether you are looking for a discussion-oriented class that focuses on the Bible or a class that emphasizes parenting or even a lecture-oriented class, there is something for you! Information on the classes is available at the information counter in the Narthex and also on-line at

www.standrewumc.org.

Please visit one next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Reflecting upon the story of Tabitha for his commentary on the book of Acts, Robert Wall wrote of the death of two of his closest friends in a single year. Together and with other Christian friends, they had earnestly prayed for healing, knowing that God's love is our final hope. Wall writes, "But our friends died anyway. Some of us were tempted to shrug it off, supposing our prayers did not work once again. . . . But this is the essential truth of our faith: God does heal the sick whether by medicine or miracle. . . . When I reflect upon the death of my friends, I cannot help feeling their haunting absence. Yet, I continue to seek God's help to look through a wider angle of vision that allows me to see other consequences of their sickness and death, consequences reflecting the evidence of God's active mercy. And I have, praise be to God." In Luke's account, Tabitha's death is the occasion for the community to grieve and to experience God's comforting presence among them. Tabitha's revival is the occasion for many others to become followers of Jesus.

Spend some time reflecting on and talking about these two stories. See where they take you. Does Solomon's prayer seem . . . safe? Where do we find the relevance of Tabitha's story? I dare say none of us are likely to pray for the raising of the dead! What do these stories say about taking risks in prayer? What did Solomon risk? Peter? Professor Wall urges us to see that our prayers and God's answers are embedded in a community of relationships and a web of consequences. This is so because God is not an absentee landlord; rather, his work and his mercy extend to every corner of our lives. How can we begin to see the God's work in a more immediate and tangible way?