

Eighteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B): “God Can Do Anything, You Know....”
Psalm 19:7-14, James 5:13-20, Mark 9:38-50
September 25-26, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Do you believe in the power of prayer?

Prayer hath wrought more than this world dreams of...

wrote Alfred Lord Tennyson in his *Idylls of the King* over a hundred years ago. In other words: “Prayer does more good than we can even imagine.” Kind of an echo of what Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians almost 2,000 years ago:

God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us. (Ephesians 3:20, The Message)

Christians are “born” to pray! Martin Luther said, “As it is the business of tailors to make clothes and of cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray.” James, the author of the epistle we heard today, believed that with all his heart! His nickname was “Old Camel Knees”! Can you guess why? Yup, he was on his knees in prayer so often that he developed thick calluses! Guitar players have calluses on the pads of their fingers, ballet dancers have calluses on their feet, and James had calluses on his knees. Lots of time invested in two-way communication with the Lord. He tells us to do the same: in both sad and glad times, when our hearts hurt and when they soar, whether we’re celebrating a birth or grieving a death, confessing our own sins or asking for grace to forgive others:

13-15 Are you hurting? Pray. Do you feel great? Sing. [Isn’t that a great reminder: “The one who sings prays twice!”] Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master. Believing-prayer will heal you, and Jesus will put you on your feet. And if you’ve sinned, you’ll be forgiven—healed inside and out.

16-18 Make this your common practice: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed. The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with.

(James 5:13-16, *The Message*)

Old Camel Knees directed plenty of energy to intercession, in other words, going to bat with God for others in their time of need. Thursday night we gathered on-line with friends who'll be formally joining our faith family in October. We've dubbed that first new member meeting "Luther in a Nutshell," because we talk about the roots of Lutheran Christianity: who Luther was, what he taught, how God used him and others to bring about the Reformation. A strong belief in the **priesthood of all the faithful** was near and dear to Luther's heart, and a novel idea in the 1500's when he preached.

In those days the priests were the only ones seen as serving as go-betweens, intermediaries, between people and God. They were believed to be the ones with special access to God's ear, given a holy responsibility not just to lead worship and administer the sacraments but to pray. Luther said, "No, no, no. In Holy Baptism we've **all** been set apart as God's priestly people, deputized to intercede for the world. A priest, a pastor, has a special call from God and the community to shepherd the flock, to publicly lead worship, to baptize and to preside at Eucharist, but **every Christian is called to pray**. "As it is the business of tailors to make clothes and of cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray."

A lot of people feel like they'd **love** to pray, but they just don't know how. On our women's retreat we'll be learning about and practicing different ways to pray, but there's no one "right" way. Prayer is communicating with God however you choose. Mary Oliver confessed in her poem "The Summer Day":

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed.

What a great reminder that God created us to be human beings, not human doings. And what affirmation that drinking in the beauty of creation becomes a prayer when we're mindful of the Source of the gift: our loving Creator!

It's not **enough** to pray solo, though. We are members of the Body of Christ, not lone rangers on a solitary pilgrimage. God calls us to public worship not just to private prayer. Remember the promise? *"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."* (Matthew 18:20) "Prayer hath wrought more than this world dreams of," so we devote time in **all** of our worship services for prayers of intercession. A gift that the pandemic has given is the evolution and expansion of both our Intercessory Prayer Group and our Wednesday worship schedule. When lock-down prevented us from gathering in person our Intercessory Prayer group went from once a month in person to weekly on-line. Our 7 a.m. Wednesday Eucharist became on-line 7 a.m. morning prayer, 12 noon midday prayer, and 7 p.m. evening prayer. Our virtual prayer times attract faith friends who are living or vacationing in other states, commuting to work, on their lunch break, receiving medical infusions. We've had people log on from their cars and from the ferry. It is such a joy. Never doubt that technology can serve God's purposes!

Some folks used to pray but stopped because the outcome they asked for, hoped for, longed for, didn't happen. I'm sure that many of us have had prayer disappointments that rendered us silent. We may even have "self-distanced" from God for awhile. I think the toughest times are when we pray for healing, especially for others, and those prayers aren't answered in any way we can recognize. We've all known that pain. So did Emily Dickinson, who wrote:

I shall know why, when time is over,
And I have ceased to wonder why;
Christ will explain each separate anguish
In the fair schoolroom in the sky.¹

All mysteries are not revealed to us now, for sure. But a Name is given to us, a precious Name, the Name of the One who died that we might live, the One who said, “...*where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*” As individuals and as a community we pray “in Jesus’ name,” believing in the power of prayer, trusting that this is true:

God can do anything, you know—far more than [we] could ever imagine or guess or request in [our] wildest dreams! He does it... by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.

It has been said, “Prayer changes us, not God.” Well, agreed, prayer **does** change us, because any form of communion with God has the power to transform us! But the witness of Scripture is that sometimes prayer changes the course of events **as well** as changing us. When our prayers don’t appear to be answered, let’s remember that God has three possible responses to our prayers: 1) Sure! 2) Not yet. 3) I have something better in mind. Someone has put it this way: prayer is like a knife that carves a vessel that can hold whatever answer God provides.

Do you believe in the power of prayer? I do. I believe in the power of **all** prayer, even those prayers that seem to have fallen on deaf Ears, at least from our very limited human perspective. I truly believe that *Prayer hath wrought more than this world dreams of...* So let us translate our worries into prayer. Let us bring our joys, our sorrows, our confusion, our guilt, into prayer. Let us trust that God listens intently and loves completely and answers always. Amen.

¹Emily Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, Pt. 4: Time and Eternity, XXXIX (1924, Bartleby.com).

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