

Answered Prayers

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 10:40-42

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;⁴² and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Every once in a while, if you're like me, you utter a prayer to God and seemingly out of nowhere it is answered! You go along from day to day offering a prayer at breakfast and then another one on the train back from the city before exhaling one as you pull up the bed covers to your chin. Sometimes the prayers are specific, "God, please let this train be on time," "Watch out for my son at school," "I'm so hungry." Other times they're more like what Anne Lamott calls the three essential prayers, "help," "thanks," "wow." Some prayers come from the depths of your soul, while others are conveyed as a divine to-do list. When I worked for Tony Campolo he would tell a story about his son, Bart. As Tony told it, Bart, who was young at the time, was on his way up the stairs to bed one night. Halfway up, Bart stopped as if remembering something, turned and looked back at his family sitting there in the living room. "I'm going to bed," Bart said, "I'm going to be praying...anybody want anything?"

As your pastor for Pastoral Care and Senior Adults these past four years, I have offered quite a few prayers. Some, I confess, have been more trivial: to make a light while driving down Montgomery, for a door to be unlocked after walking all the way to the Ed Building, and, even, for the Eagles and Phillies to win their respective championships. Others have been more sober. Across the street at Bryn Mawr Hospital, I've prayed for healing while a new scan hung on the wall showing that the cancer has spread. Just up the road at the Mansion at Rosemont I've prayed for a person to pass on, a person ready to see Jesus. At a home in Villanova, I've prayed against an addiction, and in a nursing home in Broomall I've prayed for finances. I've prayed for miracles and mercies, hope and patience, understanding and discernment. And sometimes these prayers have been answered in ways so pronounced that I have been awed.

Full disclosure, I have never audibly heard the voice of God, nor have I had a vision of the Almighty. When God has answered a prayer, the vision I have seen and the voice I have heard have not been disembodied in the sky. Rather, they have been the human voices, the human presence, of friends and neighbors.

There is a common belief that the efficacy of prayer correlates to the faithfulness of the person who is praying. “If only I had more faith,” a new widower said to me in my office a few months ago, “my wife would not have suffered so much.” While this belief is prevalent, over the years my experience has led me to believe something else. I’ve come to believe that answers to prayer have just as much to do with the faith of others as with our own faith. I’ll say that again, I’ve come to believe that answers to prayer have just as much to do with the faith of others as with our own faith.

Looking out here this morning, I can say that many of you have become the answer to the prayers of others, myself included. As I see your faces I’m reminded of particular times when you responded at just the right moment to answer the prayer of your neighbor. Some of you were not even aware you were doing so. And I think this is the way it was meant to be from the beginning. We were meant to be the answer to one another’s prayers.

The few sentences of scripture I read a couple minutes ago, are words spoken by Jesus to his disciples and the crowd that surrounds them. As I read those words you probably caught the general gist: Jesus is talking about welcoming people like you would welcome him, and the rewards that will follow: if you welcome a prophet, you get a “prophet’s reward.” A righteous person, a “righteous person’s reward.” Now a sermon on this text by itself could be interesting. I could talk about hospitality and what it means to welcome people as Christ, and that would be meaningful. But I do not think that is all Jesus is trying to say here. Instead, I think Jesus is attempting to teach us a way of life marked by noticing and responding to the needs of others.

To understand his point, some context is needed. These words of Jesus come at the very end of what is often referred to as Jesus’ missionary discourse. Jesus begins the discourse by summoning his twelve disciples and giving them authority over unclean spirits and the ability to cure

every disease and sickness. Equipped with the power of God, the twelve are sent out with clear instructions: go, proclaim the good news! And just as they turn to go, Jesus says, oh and one more thing: take nothing with you: no food, no money, not even an extra pair of socks. Rather, trust the people you meet along the way to support you. Trust that I will provide for you, through them.

Now why does Jesus do this? Why does Jesus give his disciples one of the most important charges in history – to go and share the good news and heal all those who are suffering – and then hinder them by adding, but take nothing with you? Why not provide them with a caravan of food and supplies or at least a staff like Moses' that retrieves water from rocks? Here's why. Jesus wants his disciples to know – and he wants us to understand it as well – the mission from God you are about to undertake is not possible if you go about it alone. You can heal people of pain, but you can't make food appear out of thin air. You can expel evil spirits, but you'll be cold at night if you don't find someone to give you shelter. Even if you receive your charge directly from God, you are not God.

There is no moment in our lives when we are more susceptible to believing we can go it alone than when we believe we have a mission from God. You may have a clear mandate: tutor children from Philadelphia, start a nonprofit, visit those who are sick, stay home with my children, care for my aging parent. And you may start with a lot of energy and zeal. But when the dust settles, and you start to look around, you notice you could use some friends and a good meal, you realize you're lonely and worn, and you wonder if this is what God had in mind when you first felt the call.

Friends, here is the truth: we need other people. Even the disciples, empowered by Jesus, God made flesh, needed other people to fulfill their God—given mission. It's how we were designed.

When I picture those first disciples, traveling from town to town, wandering the roads looking for a bite to eat and a place to sleep, I imagine them praying to God with each step, “Please God just a drink of water. A bite to eat.” They’re tired and depleted from doing the good work Jesus called them to do, and now they need an answered prayer. I see them entering the next town and who is there but a community ready to welcome them like they are Jesus, offering a place at the table, and a spot to lay their head. Their prayers are answered not by divine dictation, but by human faithfulness. People, people like you and me, become the answer to prayers.

Yes, it’s a calling from God to be a missionary, but it’s just as much a calling from God to welcome those who are on the road. Not all of us are called to leave home and start a new ministry. Not all of us are called to travel from town to town spreading the good news. Not all of us are called to do something that seems extraordinary on the surface. Actually, most of us are called to follow God right where we are, in our everyday ordinary lives. We are called to welcome those who are hungry. To lend a cup of cold water to one of the least of these. To be the answers to the prayers of others on their journeys of life. We are called, in the words of theologian Emilie Townes, “to approach each other through God.”

I’ve shared with you before that one of my favorite novels is Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*. It tells the story of John Ames, a congregationalist minister in the fictional town of Gilead, Iowa. Reverend Ames is approaching the end of his life, so he pens a series of reflections for the benefit of his young son about his life and ministry, and what he’s learned from it all.

At one point he shares, “This is an important thing, which I have told many people, and which my father told me, and which his father told him. When you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So, you must think, what is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation? If you confront insult or antagonism, your first impulse will be to respond

in kind. But if you think, as it were, this is an emissary sent from the Lord...you are free to act otherwise than as circumstances would seem to dictate. You are free to act by your own lights.

“Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behavior...How well do we understand our role? With how much assurance do we perform it?”¹

What is the Lord asking of you in this moment? How well do you understand your role? With how much assurance do you perform it? All of us have a role. Be it a missionary or a stay-at-home mom, a bible study teacher or a heart for hospitality. Whatever role you have, that role will answer the prayer of another person. That role will serve to support this congregation and community. I’ve seen it time and again. As another one of my mentors likes to say, “If you keep praying that God will move a mountain, God just might hand you a shovel.”

So, my closing words to you Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, in my final sermon from this pulpit as your Associate Pastor, are this: You have a role. You have been called. Each of you is a gift that God has put on this earth. You have something to contribute to the needs of the larger Body of Christ. How do I know this? Well, of course scripture tells me. But even more, I know this because I have seen it! During my time with you I have uttered many prayers and so many of them have been answered by God through you.

When I prayed for a person beginning to experience the effects of dementia, I witnessed a group of you come around them to care for them and give their spouse a rest.

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004), 124.

When I prayed for a couple who lost their child too soon, I witnessed three different people reach out to them to share their own story and walk with them.

When I prayed for a new member – new to this church, new to this area, new to being on their own in life – I witnessed one of you greet them after worship and invite them to dinner on Wednesday night.

When I prayed for a person struggling with addiction, I witnessed the restarting of a local support group post-pandemic, and one of you willing to take this person to it each week.

When I prayed for a person struggling with finances, later that same day I received an email from a retired financial planner looking to volunteer, and separately a donation designated for supporting those in need in our congregation.

Over and over, my prayers have been answered by God through you. And I know there is much my eyes have not witnessed. Much more that could be shared.

And so, this morning if you want to know if you have a role, if you have a place, you do. Your role is to use your unique God-given gifts to become the answer to the prayers of your neighbor. To listen to the gentle nudge of the Holy Spirit that pushes you in the direction you were meant to travel. To ask yourself, what is the Lord asking of me in this situation? And then believing the response. To trust that when you pray, God does answer. And it might just be through the person down the pew. May you open yourself to God's movement so that you may become the answer to prayer.

May it be so.

Amen.