

## 1 Sermon, August 29, 2010

Texts: 2 Kings 20:1-7, Mark 11:22-26

Title: "How Does Prayer Work?"

When it comes to prayer, we have lots of questions:

How do I best pray?

Will God grant my request?

If I pray in a certain way, can I be sure of the results?

Will my prayers make me a better person?

The title of this sermon is a question. "How does prayer work?" When I came up with the title, I couldn't fully answer that question; I just knew that I would wrestle with it and tell you about it.

So here's the result of my wrestling:

As I looked at the passage from Mark, I knew that it meant more than it said. In verse 23 Jesus says, *"So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."*

It seems pretty straightforward, but it doesn't seem to work quite that way. I've known plenty of people — good, kind, faithful, right-living people — who have prayed for something with all their heart and have not received it.

So there must be something more to this.

Jesus introduced his statement by saying, "have faith in God!" Was his discussion of prayer an illustration of how to have faith in God? If that were the case, the point wasn't how to get what we want, but how to ask for what God wants, in faith.

Or was faith involved by changing what we want?

What is clear to me is that, somehow, this passage is about *really believing*. There is something about the intensity of our belief that makes a difference in prayer.

If we pour out our hearts to God in prayer, if we give ourselves away in prayer, if we surrender our wills to God in prayer, if we get our own stubborn, willful selves out of the way through prayer — something happens. We receive something.

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If our prayer has that intensity, then I believe it is more than just a child asking for a new bicycle, or x-box, or ipod. It might be that child wanting the *identity* that he or she thinks might come with a new bicycle or x-box or ipod.

Prayers with that intensity may seem selfish, but they are really about our deepest needs.

If a businessman prays for a good contract, it might be really because he wants to provide for his family; it may reflect his need to love and be loved.

If a single person prays for a mate, it may be the same need.

If I pray for the success of a project, it may be that I want to be known as someone successful. I'm really seeking confirmation of my identity.

If I pray for my organization to succeed, it may be because I want to be part of something greater than myself.

When we pray with intensity, it is because we are getting close to our deepest needs: our needs for love, identity and meaning.

And when we pray for our deepest needs, we get closer to God, because it is God who meets our deepest needs for love, identity and meaning.

And it also seems that there, at the point of our deepest needs, is where prayer is most effective.

The Old Testament reading is about King Hezekiah, one of the most noble and faithful kings in the Bible. Hezekiah was at the point of death. He was not only in physical pain and weakness, but he was in spiritual turmoil. He knew that he had been loyal to God, so why was he dying this young, with so much more to do? He could not figure it out.

So, in the privacy of his bedroom, he turned his face to the wall and prayed and wept.

Hezekiah was at his point of deepest need: it was not only his desire for life, it was his desire for meaning. He wanted to accomplish something more. It may also have been about his identity. His tears were bitter, his prayers were intense, and his prayer was effective.

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Soon, the prophet Isaiah, who had previously told Hezekiah that he would die, came to Hezekiah and told him that he would live another 15 years.

I look at the story of Hezekiah and see that God answered his prayer when he poured out his soul to God, when Hezekiah came closer to God in his distress.

When Hezekiah was distraught and prayed with his face to the wall, he was most truly himself; no false face, no pretending. God is there at the place where we are most truly ourselves – the place which God's image is stamped onto our being. When we connect with that center, the place where we are most truly ourselves and closest to God, amazing things happen.

The other thing that was clear for Hezekiah is that he had to admit that he was helpless and totally dependent upon God. Those moments when we admit that we are totally dependent upon God are moments when there is the possibility of great spiritual growth.

It may be that this is the key to the passage from Mark, too. If we were to pray for a mountain to be lifted up and thrown into the sea, it would not be because we have that kind of power! It would be because we know that *God* has that kind of power, and we are dependent upon it.

We may try to imitate God's power; we may use great skill and technological expertise; but we will always be dependent upon the one who is the ultimate creator, the one who can forgive, who can give peace, who can heal.

It may be, that when Jesus was talking about moving a mountain into the sea, he was comparing God's power to some of the greatest human efforts of his day.

King Herod had commanded to be constructed the Herodium, where the top of a mountain was taken away, and the mountain turned into a fortress honeycombed with rooms.

King Herod had also commanded the construction of one of the most impressive constructions in the sea, at Caesarea Maritima. He had a harbor built where there was just a beach, the largest artificial harbor in its time.

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The speed of the harbor's construction was stunning considering its size and complexity. The breakwaters were made of lime and pozzolana, a type of volcanic ash, that would set into concrete underwater. Herod imported over 24,000 cubic meters of pozzolana from Puteoli, Italy, in order to construct the breakwaters. At a conservative estimate, a shipment of this size would have required at least 44 shiploads of 400 tons each. And other building materials, doubled these figures.

The southern breakwater was about 5 football fields long, and northern breakwater about 3 football fields long. Constructing this was an engineering marvel, using techniques that were quite uncommon.

So Jesus was saying that, through prayer, you can accomplish more than Herod the Great had done at the height of his power. Prayer may not move actual mountains, but it is much more resilient and longer-lasting than any human effort or construction.

So – today we pray prayers for healing. We know that God can accomplish great things. We know that God wants the very best for us. When we pray, we join our hearts to God's own desire.

We don't know what will happen today, but we are confident that something good will happen.

So, as people come forward for prayer, I hope that you will all pray for them and for one another.

As it says in James 5: 13-16:

"Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." James 5:13-16, NRSV.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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"Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.'" Mark 11:22-25, NRSV.

20:1\* ¶ In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, "Thus says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover."

2\* Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD:

3\* "Remember now, O LORD, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight." Hezekiah wept bitterly.

4\* Before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him:

5\* "Turn back, and say to Hezekiah prince of my people, Thus says the LORD, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; indeed, I will heal you; on the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD.

6\* I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; I will defend this city for my own sake and for my servant David's sake."

7 Then Isaiah said, "Bring a lump of figs. Let them take it and apply it to the boil, so that he may recover."

8 Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "What shall be the sign that the LORD will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the LORD on the third day?"

9 Isaiah said, "This is the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do the thing that he has promised: the shadow has now advanced ten intervals; shall it retreat ten intervals?"

10\* Hezekiah answered, "It is normal for the shadow to lengthen ten intervals; rather let the shadow retreat ten intervals."

11\* The prophet Isaiah cried to the LORD; and he brought the shadow back the ten intervals, by which the sun had declined on the dial of Ahaz.