

## SERMON: OUR LIVES, OUR PRAYERS

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I believe today's Gospel lesson is another one of those difficult passages. It raises uncomfortable theological issues and has been misused so often. Its intent has often been perverted by people who want God to bless them with riches and worldly success and by preachers who use it to justify exploitive, manipulative greed.

Also, I do not think that Jesus was offering a special incantation that we can use to somehow magically conjure up God's presence and protection. For many, the Lord's Prayer has become just an automatic rote recitation. I do not believe that Jesus expected his prayer to become the "holiest" prayer of all times. It is a model, an outline, a suggestion for personal prayer.

To address these issues in the next 20 minutes is impossible. Instead, let me offer one opinion for you to consider about the place of prayer in our contemporary lives.

Perhaps some of you, like me, have stopped believing in a God who intervenes in our lives like a grand puppeteer in the sky. The old paradigm that portrays us as helpless supplicants beseeching an all powerful sugar daddy "up there" sets up our Creator as a caricature who must be pleased, placated, flattered, and begged to be of any use to us.

If we do not believe in the puppeteer God, then why do we pray, to whom do we pray and what do we expect our prayers to accomplish? If there's no Big Guy upstairs who is waiting to hear and answer our prayers to intervene miraculously on our behalf, then why bother praying at all?

I do not mean to sound heretical. Just because our ideas about God change, does not mean that we should abandon prayer. I believe in the power of prayer. I pray (certainly not as often as I should), and I feel that my prayers can make a difference.

It is difficult to understand how prayer fits our perceptions about who or what God might be. To see God as something or someone other than a grand-puppeteer pulling our strings is not an easy transition because many of us have liked having a grand-puppeteer. Sometimes when I'm up against something that frightens or angers me, I really miss the bearded, kindly grandfather on a heavenly throne. What are we supposed to do when we begin to move beyond the personification of the love that we call God?

How does prayer work? The truth is, I simply don't know. Prayer remains a mystery to me. I cannot do anything more than speculate, and I may have it all wrong.

When we give up the idea that prayer is about changing the mind of some far-off deity, and when we embrace the concept that prayer is a way of opening ourselves to the God that dwells

in, with, through and beyond us, then we can begin to understand how prayer prepares us to be the love that is God in the world.

Prayer enables us not only to connect to the source of life, love and being, but also to provide that connection to others. As Soren Kierkegaard writes, “Prayer does not change God, but it changes the one who prays.” And prayer is the activity that enables us to become more fully human so that God can live and breathe and have being in our humanity. Our lives become the love that is God in the world.

Under this paradigm, prayer is not the words we speak. Prayer is the life we live--a life connected to God, who is love, a life connected to one another and all of creation through love. We no longer pray demanding impossible miracles to occur or lives to be changed as we think best or reality to bend to our wills. We pray expecting that *we* will be changed, made a little more whole perhaps, set free to share our lives more deeply with others, empowered to love beyond the boundaries created by our fears.

Let me illustrate what such human connectivity might look like with a real-life, modern parable. You can find the story in a book called *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell.

Roseto, is a small working-class town in Pennsylvania that was founded back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. From its founding to the late 1950's it was populated by Italian immigrants from a town also called Roseto in Italy. Roseto would have remained a relatively obscure little town had it not been for the work of medical school professor Steward Wolf. While attending a medical conference, Professor Wolf met a doctor from a town very near Roseto who told him that he'd been practicing medicine for 17 years, and in all that time none of the patients under the age of 65 who came to see him from Roseto suffered from heart disease.

This surprised Professor Wolf because by the mid-1950's heart attacks were becoming epidemic in the United States with heart disease the leading cause of death in men under 65. Professor Wolf decided to investigate. Colleagues and students from his medical school were recruited, and they analyzed the medical records of the inhabitants of Roseto.

The entire population was tested and re-tested. The results were astonishing. No one under 55 had died of a heart attack or showed any signs of heart disease. Indeed, the death rate from all causes in Roseto was 30 to 35% lower than the national average. Wolf's team broadened their research and brought in sociologists and members of other academic disciplines. They found no suicides, no alcoholism, no drug addiction, and almost no crime.

What was going on in this town? They checked diets. But the locals cooked with lard not oil. They ate plenty of sausage and salami and hard cheeses. The researchers found that a whopping 41% of their calories came from fat. People in Roseto didn't jog or play sports. In fact, many of them smoked stogies and struggled with obesity.

Next the researchers began checking genetics. They tracked down relatives living in other parts of the United States to see if they shared the same remarkable good health and found that they did not. What about the region in Pennsylvania where Roseto was located? Perhaps there was something in the water, the climate, or the soil. But the two closest towns, just a few miles apart, did not have the same good health. Yet the water, soil, and climate were all the same.

Eventually the researchers realized that there was something in the way the people of Roseto related to one another. They visited one another. They stopped to chat with one another. Three generations lived under one roof. Researchers saw the calming and unifying effect of the local church. They counted 22 separate civic organizations in a town of just 22,000 people. They noted the egalitarian ethos that discouraged the wealthy from flaunting their success and helped the unsuccessful thrive despite their failures. People were nourished and healed by other people. At one time the little town of Roseto became a laboratory demonstrating that healthy human connectivity is good for one's mental and physical health. Medical journals dubbed the study the Roseto Effect.

Sadly, over time the Roseto Effect faded as the integrated community life of the close-knit little town was replaced by the modern pursuit of individualism and consumerism. Within 10 years, according to a later study, the emotional and physical benefits that Roseto once enjoyed had disintegrated. Roseto now reflects the same diminished health as the rest of our population.

The well-documented Roseto Effect show us that genuine, loving human interconnectivity is a wellspring of health and healing. Those relationships are forged in love, tempered by prayer and exemplified by the way people lived.

Modern theologian Bishop John Shelby Spong writes, "Prayer to me is the practice of the presence of God, the act of embracing transcendence and the discipline of sharing with [others] the gifts of living, loving and being."

Prayer changes who we are and how we act. Prayer moves us to embrace our neighbors in deep bonds of love. That is a power we have barely begun to understand and to employ to heal our broken world. Let us continue to pray without ceasing by perceiving all of life as a prayer. May we open ourselves to the God that lives in, with, through, and beyond us, so that we become more completely the humans that God intended. Let us embrace our best humanity in prayer and manifest it in our lives, which are the greatest prayers we will ever pray. And above all, may we be the love that is God in the world.