

Being Careful What You Pray For

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Psalm 82; Luke 18:9-14

One of the most deeply personal and most deeply mysterious and most deeply unique and most deeply powerful things that you and I do, as people of faith, is pray. Each day, each week, each month we find ourselves in a moment when we open a space in our lives for some kind of time with the transcendent. For some of us this is a daily ritual that you can almost set your clock by. For others this is a moment that comes more often in response to what is happening around you or to you. For others this is a casual conversation with the immanent friend we have in Jesus. For others there is a list – not unlike the list printed in the back of our bulletin – this personal list of prayer requests that you take with you into your time with God. However you choose to pray – prayer is this sacred moment of connection with the creator that in one way or another expresses the deep within.

When Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector he was in part getting at this deeply personal moment of expression. The Pharisee in his prayer expresses his pride and his position, kind of reminding God how good God has it that he's on his team. The tax collector looks deep within and finds a certain level of shame and remorse and expresses a deep yearning for the mercy of God. And maybe that's the story Jesus is saying, you are what you pray. You are what you pray.

We've been saying this summer that the Psalms – this prayer book of the Bible – is this collection of a variety of prayers that capture the expressions of the people of Israel. Some are prayers of praise – some are prayers of lament – some are prayers of intercession – some are prayers for help – some are prayers of petition – some are prayers of confession. Each of them this deeply personal, deeply mysterious, deeply

unique, and deeply powerful expression to God. You are what you pray.

This is a part of what prayer is. It identifies where you are. Who you are in the moment. You are what you pray.

The other part of what prayer is, beyond the expression of who we are, is, if we allow it to be, the discovery of who God is. Prayer can be that time when we not only tell God who we are but God tells us who God is. And the Psalms are wonderful tools to help us discover through the prayers of Israel – the nature and character of God. And in learning the nature and character of God we open ourselves to be changed more and more into the likeness of God. You are what you pray, you are expressing yourself to God and you are becoming what you pray in letting the character and spirit of God change you. The Pharisee, thinking that God was some American Idol judge, prayed his performance prayers and became as a result a more prideful and arrogant and insensitive person. The tax collector, thinking that God was a holy and merciful God, prayed his prayer of confession with the hope of being forgiven, and perhaps became as a result of his prayers a new creation of grace.

You are what you pray and you are becoming what you pray.

In the fall of 1960 a federal judge ordered that the white schools of New Orleans were to admit children of color. Though it was six years since *Brown vs. Board of Education* this was still a somewhat radical order in the segregated south. On November 14 four young elementary age African-American children walked to their new school for the first time. Three of them to one school, one to another. The sidewalks leading up to both schools were lined with angry, racist parents and their kids screaming every vile and abusive word they knew. The school buildings themselves were empty – boycotted entirely by the white students and their families. One of these new students – the one who was attending her new school all alone was a six year old girl named Ruby Bridges. And every

day Ruby like the others would be subjected to this chorus of hate. One day as she approached the school door in the midst of the jeering mob ... Ruby paused and appeared to be talking with these angry people. When she got into the school building her teacher, who had witnessed this, asked Ruby what she said to these people. Ruby replied, "Nothing." "Well, Ruby, it looked like you were talking to them." "Oh, I wasn't talking to them," she said, "I was praying." "What were you praying, Ruby?" "Oh," she said, "I was praying for them."

Robert Coles, the Harvard psychiatrist, who spent the first year of Ruby's schooling counseling her, asked her what had possessed her to pray for these people who were screaming epithets and threatening her with harm. She said that that's what she did with her mommy every night. She prayed for the people because they seemed like people needing to be prayed for. She said that on Sunday morning the preacher prayed for them too.

You become what you pray.

So this morning the Psalmist in Psalm 82 provides us a prayer through which to meditate upon the nature and character of God. This is not a prayer of expression - this is a prayer of meditation. A prayer through which to ponder the nature of God, that we may become more like him. In this prayer, God is at the judge's bench and brought before him are the gods of the earth. This pantheon of gods, are brought before the God of Israel. So they come into Yahweh's court and Yahweh pronounces judgment. "How long," he says, "will you judge unjustly and show partiality

to the wicked?" And then God says if there is anyone who is to receive justice it is:

Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
Maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy;

Give justice to the weak and the orphan. Maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy. This was Israel's meditative prayer. Inside Yahweh's courtroom is justice for the weak and the orphan, the lowly and destitute, the weak and the needy. This is the gift of the psalmist to praying people – the image of God through which we might be changed. God invites us into his chambers and invites us to see the world as he sees it. This is what I am looking for, God says. Justice. Justice not for you. Justice for the weak and the orphan. The lowly and the destitute. The weak and the needy. This is the God the psalmist invites us to pray to. And after a while you become what you pray.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish scholar, said this about prayer: "To pray is to bring God back in the world, to establish his kingship for a second at least." Do you have any idea what it might mean to you and to me if we disciplined ourselves to establish God's kingship in this world if only for a second? If prayer were a becoming?

Do you remember the story Jesus told about the sheep and the goats and the final judgment? The Son of Man with all his angels sat before all the peoples of the earth to separate the sheep from the goats. And now is the time to finally see what God was really all about. What really matters to the judge? And the

“Prayer can be that time when we not only tell God who we are but God tells us who God is.”

sheep get separated from the goats. And what matters to the judge – what we could have always been meditating upon, what we could have always been becoming – what was always on the mind of God was that his people would see the hungry and feed them, see the thirsty and give them something to drink, see the stranger and welcome them, see the naked and give them clothing, see the sick and take care of them, see the prisoners and visit them. This was always in the heart of God. This is what the kingdom is about.

Now I don't know about you – but what I do know for me – is that I have this thing in me that wants to make the world about me. I have this thing in me that wants to make my religion about me. I have this thing in me that wants to make my prayers about me. Expression of me. I kind of want God to get with the program. My program. It's like this gravitational pull that insists that God get drawn into my world. Not the world, my world. That in my prayers God understands me– and not necessarily me understanding God. Being not becoming. And with this self-absorption comes a sense of settling. Settling with the world as it is. Settling with me as I am. As long as I get my share, then maybe someday I'll think about everybody else's share. And no real prompt to do anything about anything.

This past week we lost Elie Wiesel – the great prophet and survivor of the holocaust – whose mission it was to insist that we not forget. To insist that we remember that in every age there are the oppressed, the weak, the orphan, the lowly, the destitute. “The opposite of love,” Wiesel said often, “is not hate, it is indifference.”

And maybe along with that tax collector beating his breast – it should be our constant reminder how prone we are to think that justice is something that maybe, maybe we will get around to.

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?”

It's been told that once upon a time the devil himself held council with all his

emissaries from Hell. All the citizens of Hades. And he told them that he wanted to send one of them to earth to bring about the ruination of the souls of men and women. He asked who would volunteer. One creature came forward and said, “I will go.”

And Satan said, “If I send you what will you tell the children of earth to ruin their souls?”

And the creature said, “I will tell the children of earth that there is no heaven.”

And Satan said, “They will not believe you, for in every human heart there is a longing for heaven and a hope that good will triumph over evil. You may not go.”

Then another creature came forward, more foul than the first. And Satan said, “If I send you, what will you tell the children of earth?”

And the creature said, “I will tell them that there is no hell.”

And Satan looked at him and said, “Oh no, they won't believe you. For in every human heart there is a conscience, and an instinctive sense that not only will good prevail but that evil will be punished. You may not go.”

Then one last creature came forward, this one from the darkest place of Hell. And Satan said to him, “And if I send you, what will you say to women and men to aid them in the ruination of their souls?”

And the creature said, “I will tell them that there is no hurry.”

And Satan said, “Go.”

Do you know the name Barbara Henry? You're not supposed to. Back in 1960 when the word came that little six year old Ruby Bridges would be attending the William Frantz Elementary School not only did all the children of that school and their families boycott and vacate the building – but so did all the teachers. All the teachers except one. Barbara Henry. Barbara Henry said let me teach Ruby Bridges. Let me walk

through that line of hate every morning and teach Ruby Bridges. And for a year – all by themselves in a classroom – one teacher, one student – Ruby and Barbara became something together. Years later Ruby Bridges said, “Miss Henry was the nicest teacher I ever had.”

Tell them that there is no hurry. The world is not as it should be. We all know that. Folks are sick, hungry, naked, alone and in prison. It's just not as it should be. Two weeks from now we'll be taking care of 265 kids who need help getting ready for school. The following week we'll be hosting three families that don't have a home. They tell me they need volunteers at the food pantry. They tell me they can use some tutors starting in September. They tell me they need some folks to help read to kids in the Early Childhood Center. They tell me that we could still use some support to send our kids to Nicaragua next month.

It all matters. Every little bit matters. “When words,” said Elie Wiesel, “brings you closer to the prisoner, to the patient, to the starving child - then this is prayer.” Give justice to the weak and the orphan. Maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy.

If not you, who? If not now, when?

You become what you pray.



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Church of the Palms

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