

Thursday of this week I attended a workshop at Winthrop hosted by some social service agencies. The workshop was on understanding hope in the midst of the disease of Alzheimer's. At my table I heard the stories of one man who was a pastor who is the sole care giver for his wife who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's about 4 years ago. Also at my table was a social worker whose mother was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's and who was now in a care facility in Charlotte.

I left that conference with a couple of observations. First observation was about how lonely it is for someone to care for their loved one who has Alzheimer's especially a spouse. I heard stories about how family members were able to begin to notice changes in their loved ones before the medical personnel were able to recognize or acknowledge it.

I heard stories about people giving up jobs in order to care for their loved one. I heard stories about people having to learn new skills because their spouse did a lot of the housework or the financial work. I heard stories of frustrated care givers feeling as though they were alone and no one understood what they were going through.

The second observation from the workshop came from the featured speaker, Dr. Cynthia Forrest, a professor of Social Work at Winthrop. She talked about how when we encounter a challenging circumstance like Alzheimer's we hope for a miracle but we think that miracles only occur in specific ways.

Even though Dr. Forrest did not use God language I found myself interpreting what she said through theological language or God language. What I heard her say through my theological lens is that when we face challenging events or tragedy or pain, we hope and pray for signs of a specific type of miracle to happen.

For instance, in the case of Alzheimer's, we pray for our Mom or Dad or wife or husband to return to the way that we knew them 2, 3, 5 years ago. She shared how we think that a sign of a miracle has occurred if Mom or Dad or wife or husband returned to what they were like 2, 3, 5 years ago.

Dr. Forrest, though, challenged us to broaden our understanding of what a miracle is. She challenged us to broaden our understanding of what we can hope in. Dr. Forrest challenged us to not ever give up hope. But to see hope in a broader way than we had ever seen hope before.

I found myself thinking about the times when I have heard medical staff say to a family of a person who is about to die, "there is nothing left for us to do." But I left that workshop and turned to these Scriptures and have come to realize something. There is always something left to do. It just may not be what we have been trained to do or it may not be what we have always done. But no matter what the situation, there is always something that we can do.

The first Scripture that Tom read is commonly called the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer is found in two places in the Bible. It is found in Luke where we read it from and it is also found in the gospel of Matthew. The one which we will recite a little later on in the service is based more on Matthew's translation than Luke's.

In the Scripture that Tom read, the followers of Jesus notice that Jesus is praying. We are told that he is praying in a certain place. Does this mean a literal place? Or does this mean a figurative place? The certain place that Jesus may be praying from may be a place of confusion or a place of pain or a place of dissatisfaction. We don't know. But we are told that Jesus is at a certain place where he offers up his prayers.

As Jesus is praying, one of his disciples then asks him to teach them how to pray. What is behind that question? Is this question to Jesus asking for guidance to pray based on a sense that they feel disconnected from God and they want Jesus to help them to reconnect?

Jesus then shares the words that make up what we now call the Lord's Prayer. In Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus follows this prayer with affirming persistence in prayer. Jesus says to Ask, to Knock, and to Seek. To be persistent.

But praying to God may not mean that we see the results that we are looking for. In the case of Alzheimer's, our family member is probably not going to return to the way they were 2, 3, 5 years ago. In the case of cancer, we may continue to battle cancer or it may disappear from our body or the body of our loved one. In the case of a challenging situation in front of us, answers may not come quickly.

And when prayers are not answered in the way that we are only looking for prayers to be answered, we come up with answers to try to explain it. We say clichés like "God will never put on you more than you can handle" (a phrase by the way not found in the Bible). After a tragic death we say clichés like "God wanted the person in heaven" or it was simply their time to go.

But even though we come up with clichés like this to try to explain events that don't make sense to us, these answers are ultimately unsatisfying. We make assumptions that God is the only power in the world and ignore the presence of the powers of evil, disease, pain, and death. By using these types of clichés we tend to make God out to become impersonal and disconnected to us.

But I think what Jesus teaches in his prayer which we call the Lord's Prayer is that prayer is an opportunity to focus in on what is important and to be open to what God may be doing in our midst. Our prayer may not be answered in such a way that someone returns to what they were like in the past. But our prayer may provide us some greater wisdom about God and God's will for our life.

To pray to God as Father is an invitation into a personal relationship with God. God is not far away. God is like a loving parent. Intimate and close. In our prayers during times of struggle or challenge our prayers can be an opportunity to draw us closer to God. Maybe our prayers draw us closer to seeing life from the perspective of the divine and not from our limited point of view.

To pray for God to forgive our sins is an opportunity to not be defined by our sins but by our forgiveness. Asking God to forgive us for our sins is another way of asking God to help us learn from our mistakes. To grow and not to live in the past.

Accepting that we can learn from our mistakes frees us up to forgive others as Jesus prays in this prayer. If we know that we have been forgiven for past mistakes then this frees us up to act like God acts and to forgive those who trespass against us. To forgive those who have wronged us.

You may have come into worship today looking for some answers as to why your prayers have not been answered. You may have come into worship feeling the pain and frustration of lifting up to God your petitions and you feel as though God is painfully silent.

In the service today we are not going to respond to your pain by lifting up shallow clichés that ignore what you are going through. No quick answers that leave us feeling unsatisfied. Instead, I think we lift up a desire to open ourselves to answers which may not be what we are looking for.

Maybe an answered prayer is a deeper relationship with someone as you or they go through their hardship. Maybe an answered prayer is having a sense that your mistakes from the past are not really all that big of a deal and you can move on with your life.

Maybe an answered prayer is the strength and courage to be with the person who is going through the difficulty. Maybe an answered prayer is the ability to sit with the person who is about to die without having the need to say a word. Maybe an answered prayer is to give up the need for a solution and to simply be present.

Maybe an answered prayer is simply space to be without having to come up with answers. Maybe an answer is simply learning to accept to live in a place where there is no answer.

Ask, Knock, and Seek. We pray together that God will open some doors so that we can see and experience God in a fresh and growing way.

That to me sounds like an answer to prayer. AMEN.

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-Luke 11: 1-13

-Given: July 28, 2013 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)