

Luke 22: 39-44

Unanswered Prayer

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The Congregational Church of Needham

There is a famous wall in Jerusalem right next to the Temple. It is pocked with crevices and people come every day to stand next to the wall and talk to God. Some of the men wrap themselves in prayer shawls. The women cover their heads. Children walk with their parents and bow their heads out of the respect for this place. This is a place where many people meet God in prayer. For centuries people have come to this sacred spot in Jerusalem to ask God for help, and as you get close to the wall you will see that the cracks in this wall are not filled uniformly with mortar but unevenly with little pieces of paper that folks have rolled up and wedged into the crevices. Written in all the many languages of the world, these scraps of paper contain heartfelt prayers. The wall is a tribute to the way that people believe that if they ask God for what they need, God will hear them and respond.

This month our worship theme is Prayer. Prayer is more common than you think. There are sacred places all over the world where people gather to talk to God. Sometimes there are moments when everyone gives in to the prayer reflex. When a plane crashed in France this Tuesday week the whole world prayed for the families of the crew and passengers. When people are really worried in the hospital they look for the chapel. Or maybe when life is uncertain they go on the internet to find a prayer chain and get more people knocking on heaven's door.

But what do you do when your prayers seem to be falling on deaf ears? When I announced this series of sermons to the deacons they told me that it would be important to have at least one sermon on unanswered prayer. Don't tell us more stories about people who have experienced the miracle of prayers that were answered; tell us what to do when prayer is not effective. Tell us what to think when we pray in vain for months or years. Tell us how to keep our faith then things go wrong no matter

what we do. Tell us what to believe when we hit a wall and keep sticking pieces of paper into the crevices of what faith we have while no one seems to hear our petitions or answer our prayers. How do you believe in prayer then?

Our Bible story today comes from one of the most famous scenes in all of scripture. It is the night before Jesus was crucified. That evening he gathered with his friends for the Passover meal and then when the meal was over they sang some hymns and Jesus went into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Jesus knew that his enemies were closing in that night. He understood that his time was short. He had tried to follow God's will and do what he believed was right but even as he prayed for God to let this cup pass he did not hear an answer to his prayer. God seemed to have a deaf ear.

The question of the deacons and many brave people of faith seems to be why? Why won't God answer all our prayers? Why does God seem to be so helpful sometimes and so unresponsive at other times? What kind of God leaves us in moments like this one? Let's take a look at Luke 22 and see what we can learn.

In the first place, unanswered prayer is normal. This scene is one of the most familiar in the whole Bible. People everywhere can relate to it. Lots of paintings depict Jesus praying to a rock while his disciples sleep. When God seems to ignore your petitions you feel you are addressing a rock and all your friends have abandoned you. Gethsemane means oil press and the image of Jesus in this moment is that he is hard-pressed on all sides. We can understand Jesus' dilemma because we can all think of times when our prayers went unanswered. Times growing up when we longed for affirmation and no one noticed; times as young adults when we searched for love and it took a while; times when we struggled to find our gifts or path; times when we prayed for our family but nothing changed. For Jesus prayer came as naturally as taking a breath of air. If he had moments when his prayers went unanswered of course we will too.

When it comes to unanswered prayer, I think **Why** is the wrong question. The question is not *Why did this happen to me?* You are not a particularly jinxed. You are in the company of Jesus. You

are not unworthy of God's attention; you are human. You are not being punished. Your faith is not wanting. This is one of the mysteries of life. In the case of Jesus he could not see what God was up to. He began to see that he must suffer but he could not recognize that God would be able to bring history's greatest victory out of his defeat. He understood that he was likely to be crucified but he could not imagine that God would be able to raise him from the dead.

The question is not why does this happen to me but “What do I make of my unanswered prayers”? When your prayers go unanswered then the question is **What is God doing?** I want to talk to you today about Hirsi Ali. Hirsi Ali was no stranger to unanswered prayer. Born in Mogadishu Somalia, her father was a political activist who opposed female genital mutilation but while he was in prison Ali's grandmother had the procedure done on Ali when she was 5 years old. Ali grew up in Kenya, attended a Muslim School and practiced the strictest Islamic disciplines. She was soon married to an abusive husband; if you google her you will see on her forehead a scar from a near fatal beating at his hands. In 1992 while visiting family in Europe, Ali defected to the Netherlands and sought political asylum. Her petition was granted in eight weeks – a process that normally takes eight months – and this was the first indication for the 23- year old that God had heard any of her many prayers. An avid reader, she soon spoke six languages and became a translator for abused women in asylum centers in the Netherlands. At 33 she became a member of Parliament in the Netherlands, an advocate for women and a staunch critic of the treatment of women in Islam.

She since emigrated to the US and became a fellow at the Enterprise Institute and Harvard's Kennedy School. She tells her story in the book **Infidel**, which tracks a life of many dead ends and dark defeats. But the key to her transformation was her persistence. Jesus says knock at the door of prayer and do not lose heart. Seek and do not give up. Pursue your faith and hold fast to what you need – no matter what. If you prayers don't seem to be answered do not give up- persevere.

Finally, unanswered prayer can be a gift. Jesus did not see it at first but there was a gift in the fact that God did not answer his prayers at Gethsemane. In the Garden when Jesus could see that God would not give him what he wanted Christ had the wisdom to pray, “Not my will but yours be done”. That is the hardest prayer of all. Sometimes it feels like a defeat but there is also relief in that prayer.

Country singer, Garth Brooks, has a song entitled Unanswered Prayer. He describes going back to his high school with his wife and meeting an old flame. He remembers how much he prayed that God would allow him to get together with this girl he knew in high school. Now as he sees her, he realizes that she was not the angel he has imagined in his dreams. They have nothing to talk about now, and he thinks about what a gift it was that he did not get what he thought he wanted most, but met his wife instead. The song’s refrain is, “Remember when you talk to the man upstairs if he does not answer it does not mean God does not care. Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers because some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.

To be human is to be vulnerable, and never know enough about why things happen to you, but to continue anyway, to press on. If you can let go of the pretentiousness of life and search for its gifts you may discover the kind of grace that Garth Brooks puts to music. People are fascinated by Gethsemane because this was one of Christ’s hardest times but also perhaps his finest hour. This was the moment when he gave himself most fully to God’s purposes.

When you take your unanswered prayers and embrace them instead of running from them, whether you are stuffing prayers into a wall or sinking into the depth of confusion, if you can find the grace to step away and then the ability to let go and allow God to work in your life you may realize in time that what you assume is defeat is not the end but the ability to dance. The courage to search for the gift even in your unanswered prayers is to thrive even as you face adversity; it is the ability to dance wherever you are. Then you see the face of God. Then, like Jesus, you become that face of God for everyone else.