

Intercession

by Brian Russo

Psalm 86:1-7; 1 John 3:18-24

“Hear my prayer, LORD; listen to my cry for mercy. When I am in distress, I call to you, because you answer me.”

Really? Is that so? I was in distress all of last month and I never heard an answer. I prayed to you, O Lord, for my March Madness bracket but you clearly never answered me. Me, a preacher of your Word, who watches college basketball with every free second that Anya allows, coming in 12th out of 24 PCCH contestants? You abandoned me, God!

Obviously all of that is a bit of tongue-in-cheek. I have a hard enough time with prayer as it is, that praying for something as superficial as correct picks in a free tournament doesn't really cross my spiritual agenda. And yet, we all know of someone who has no quibble with asking the Divine for such things like a parking space on a rainy day. What's with that by the way? God really cares if you get a little wet or not? I think Jesus at some point got rained on, get over it. Or how about when people use prayer and scripture to affirm God's apparent favoritism toward a specific sporting team, John 3:16 signs and all? Get real. Yeah, God's up there, secretly pulling strings for the Phillies; God cares if J-Roll gets a hit in the seventh inning or not. Please.

So really, what is with some of our prayers? Do we really think of ourselves as the singularities of this universe such that some of our *needs* are actually perceived worthy of God's time more than the needs of others? Now of course some of our needs here are indeed worthy of attention, I'm not insensitive to that, but there's still just something about that question that begets my reservation when approaching prayer. I often think to myself, why would I want to take God away from an event or dialogue where Divine intervention is actually necessary? I mean does God really want or need to hear about my thankfulness over my poker victory at the Frazier's on Friday; or about the mutilated chicken I'll eat for dinner tonight? I don't know, it just sounds too Levitical for me. And that's not to say that there isn't anything valuable to prayer – of course there is – there's something so undeniably humbling about it. So yes indeed, there is a virtue in praying, it's just that at times and in some of our fashions, it doesn't make sense to me.

I remember being in 8th grade Sunday School, alone with two teachers... that's right, I was the only one ever to show up (kind of explains why I'm in this pulpit I guess)... and asking them “shouldn't God only be called on for the important stuff?” But even then, is that how we are to think of God; as just a genie in the bottle; a one-way street toward a miracle when we need to summon it? No wonder we hardly get the answers we want and when we want them.

And yet, by scripture and theologian we are told that if we are right with God our prayers will be heard and answered. That God will be with us; that God will intercede on our behalf and especially when we are in a time of distress. 1 John even tells us that, “we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask (v.21-22).” Quick show of hands – who here can testify to this? Who here or anywhere for that matter are the witnesses to an everlasting receiving? If no one can raise their hand, then what does that say about the authority of Holy Scripture, or about the efficacy of prayer, or perhaps even more damning: about the being we are praying to and told to have confidence in?

See, often our real world experiences conflict with the theological realm we have been indoctrinated with. I mean, of course, it would be great to parrot that yes, God indeed is a loving and giving god, and wherever two of us are gathered there God will be also. And of course it would be great to say that God hears all of our prayers, simultaneously and attentively. And of course it would be great to preach that we ought to pray with thankfulness and confidence for as it is written, God has and will certifiably answer us. Of course it would be great to say all of those things. But of course, for me at least, it would also be disingenuous.

For what is to be said to those who have prayed diligently and righteously and yet still and never have heard God give an answer to that which they so desperately needed? What is to be said to those people, to those who have been left abandoned in divine and eternal silence? What is to be said?

If the fortuitous person thanks God for prayers answered and a life counted by innumerable blessings, should those who suffer then find it prudent to blame God?

You see, the theology that teaches that God-is-wonderful-this and God-is-giving-that is great both in the classroom and from pulpits and positions of prosperity. It's all so hopeful and neatly wrapped together. That is until you read about a shooting massacre killing seven at a Dutch mall. That is until you see a wave coming and see no more. That is until you step into a hospital room of a 45-year old mother of three in the end stage of cancer. It is there that all of our beautifully espoused theology collapses in on itself.

...Now of course, many of us have heard of miraculous tales, where the doctors had no explanation for recovery. We've seen so many say, "You see, God does intervene." And praise be to God if so. But how then are we to reconcile when there is no miracle? Indeed, how are we to reconcile such things like that which happened to Tom Garcia? You see, Tom was my best friend through elementary school. We grew up together, played football together, and spent many weekdays, afternoons and nights at each other's house acting ridiculous, indeed acting like children. Children. But halfway through 6th grade, right at the time our childhood was becoming something new and exciting, Tom entered a hospital and not long after died of liver failure. Liver failure... He was in 6th grade! When he was diagnosed his family prayed, and the church prayed, and I prayed, and our friends prayed, and... nothing; just divine silence, and then his death.

Like so many of our lamenting psalmists, I questioned the depths of God. I asked to be heard, listened to, and Tom to be healed, and when none of that occurred, I, just like the psalmists felt abandoned. But I know now that it's not because of God that I felt abandoned, but it was because of us. It wasn't God's fault for the tragedies that have and are still occurring; and to think that God was or is ever pulling the strings in death and illness for the sake of some sort of master plan is nothing short of perverse. No, it's not God's doing that most of us at some point in life feel disappointed, let down, or betrayed, rather it's because of us and the language we have used that has indirectly pigeonholed God that God's failure to meet our needs is not only an possible outcome but a probability.

For we have made scripture, theology and prayer out to be something entirely otherworldly, heavenly, and divinely inspired. We have called it perfect and authoritative, and in doing so have lost sight that all of our words for and about God are straight from the mouths, souls and minds of imperfect finite humans. From us! God never told us that our prayers would be always answered, the People who wrote certain Biblical texts did. Just as God never declared that the Cosmic powers were of omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence, rather the People who studied theology did.

And when they stated that God is always good, always present, and always powerful they set God up so to let us down when things inevitably went wrong; for as logic dictates, God can no longer be all three at once during times of crisis and tragedy. Just the same, by stating that God will forever hear and answer all of our prayers, we have trapped God into an inescapable paradox, in that God will be thanked for the good when it is done while questioned when the opposite occurs.

So what's the solution then? To stop praying? Absolutely not. But we must stop putting demands, and indeed, constraints on a Being that is by its very nature beyond and bigger than all of our understanding. More, we must free ourselves from the notion that God will always intercede when the crap of a fallen world meets us in or out of frequency. We must free ourselves from which my mom's grandmother could not. One day she received news that her daughter of just 16 years was diagnosed with appendicitis. She prayed in speech and whispered her devout words, confident that her God was going to fix her daughter. She believed in this so much that she did not bring her daughter to a doctor, even though she was begged by family and friends, for what could a human doctor do that her God could not? So she waited and waited, and did so in divine silence, for in the end she watched not as her daughter was saved but as she died.

My friends, there is but a simple truth to life. Pain and sickness will come, there is no doubt, and often God will not outwardly be there to do anything about it. As such it is down to us and each of our souls to take the punches as they come, doing the best in our actions to soften the blows; both for ourselves and for our neighbors in need. 1 John tells us the same: that we cannot live merely by words and speech, or as I would interject, by the solemn quiet of our prayers of need, but rather we must take action and do so knowing the truth. The Truth, as John also writes, that we know that God is in us by the Spirit he gave us. Thus, it is our calling this morning, up until when the trumpet sounds, to strengthen our spirits and work to be the source of intercession, for it is the Divine *in* you that is your and our hope. Amen.