

Season After Pentecost [Proper 12] - Year C

July 27/28, 2013

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 138; Luke 11:1-13

“Why Pray”

Jesus prayed. Let that settle in for a bit because I think it’s significant. Jesus — the Son of God, living a fully human life on earth prayed. *(Pause)* He taught his disciples to pray, too. He taught them to approach prayer knowing their relationship with God was intimate — like a child to a loving “Abba” (“Daddy”). Jesus taught them to keep God’s name holy and honor God’s kingdom ways in living. He told his followers to share with God their needs for “sustenance (daily bread), relationship (forgiveness), and safety (bringing us through times of trial).”¹ Prayer isn’t about having the right words. Prayer is simply honest. And Jesus tells his disciples that prayer can be offered in trust – like a man who trusts his friend will help him out of a jam or a child who trusts that his father wouldn’t give him a snake or scorpion instead of food.

The prayer of Jesus’ teaching is comforting and seems powerful. It’s something to hold on to and to believe in.... *until* our faith is rattled by unanswered prayer. If God is all powerful and wants to give what is good and life giving, then why do so many prayers go unanswered? Here we wade into dangerous territory because how prayer works is as complex and impossible to fully understand as God’s own self. There are some things we can say from our human experiences. Unanswered prayer is not about the quantity of prayer — some people have hundreds praying for them but still are not cured of a disease, for example. We can’t always explain that all unanswered prayers must have been contrary to God’s will — because many unanswered prayer are surely in tune with the peace, health and good relationship of God’s kingdom. Conversely, we can’t even say that all unanswered prayer must be God’s will — because there is much that happens that is actually contrary to God’s will — like violence, torture, starvation, premature death---- things that are more aptly explained as the tragic result of

evil or human sin, or when nature or our body's cells becoming unexplainably out of sync with the intended goodness of God's creation. Why pray then if we can't count on God to give what we ask for? Where's God's power when we need it?

It was intended to be a once in a lifetime bonding trip for a mother and her college-age son. The mother knew for her son to buy into it, he would have to had a good deal to say about it. That is how Pastor Lillian Daniel ended up staying in a treehouse surrounded by shrieking monkeys in Nicaragua. After a long day of complex travel, they were escorted to their treehouse about midnight. They had to cross a long hanging bridge – the kind with wooden slat that you can see through and ropes as handles. In the dark they had no idea how high they were. Daniel had trouble sleeping that night after she read the management's brochures about the possible poisonous snacks and insects... as she listened to shrieking monkey and jungle sounds like you heard in the TV series "Lost." But in the light of morning, they found themselves in a lovely treehouse amid a beautiful natural environment of tropical fauna and flora with incredible views. When they walked to the community center for breakfast, they had to cross that suspension bridge again. This time they could see how far down the deep the gorge was that they were crossing.

By the second night of this mother-son bonding adventure, Daniel found herself sitting alone in the treehouse, abandoned by a son who was flirting with all the girls by the swimming pool. But she had no trouble enjoying the view, sunset, and a book. After sunset, she was reading and the lights went out. Talk about pitch dark. She said she could feel her heart thumping. She sat up and the lights came on. She went back to her book. The lights went off again. She sat up. The lights came back on, thank goodness. Daniel then thought, "I'm in this groovy, eco-lodge. They probably have motion detectors to conserve energy. So if the lights go out, I only have to move." Still, she decided she had enough of being alone. She headed out for the community center. Down the path and onto the suspension bridge, which were all well lit. Halfway across the

bridge, the lights went out. There she was hanging in the dark on a swaying bridge.

She told herself, “take a breath, Lillian, you know what you have to do. You have to let go of the rope rails and make a motion with your hands so the light come back on.” She slowly raises her hands and waves. Nothing happens. She takes deep breaths against panic and tries again. Nothing. She begins to get more vigorous in her waving, like “Hey, hey — I’m here!” Still nothing happens. After 10 minutes she realizes she needs to suck it in and make her way to the side in the dark. She carefully put one foot in front of the other. After what seemed like a lifetime, she reached the other side. She immediately goes to the lodge’s lobby. At which point, the lights come on.

She said to the person behind the desk, “You really need to do something about the motion detector lights. I was just stuck on the bridge....”

“We don’t have motion detector lights.” “What?” she thinks “This is Nicaragua, Ma’am. The power goes on and off all the time.” Daniel said all she could think at the time was “Oh my goodness, if God had been watching me on that bridge, I must have looked like such a moron! There I was, waving my arms, as if to say ‘Return lights! I will restore the lights and power of all Nicaragua!!’ What a moron.”

Daniel comments that she looks at that experience as a metaphor for how we can get confused in our faith. “We think,” she said, “that we have all the power. We’re the power source. I wasn’t the source of power. That was in Managua. We’re not the source of power. God is.” But, she wasn’t without any power, hanging on that swinging bridge. She did find the courage to put one foot in front of the other and slowly make her way to the other side and safety. “That,” she remarks, “is the power of Christ that works within us.” God is the power source that we can not control. But the power of Chris working within us is how we are able to respond to what happens to us. Here is Daniel’s conclusion: God is not a magical genie. We can’t put something on our “To Do” list for God. That’s not how it works. But God does give us the power to respond to the

things we are struggling with in our lives and world.”²

Why pray? This is what we can say for sure. First, our Lord told us to pray and lay out our deepest thoughts and needs. Jesus told us to be humble but bold and persistent in our prayer lives. Second, God listens to our prayers. Our relationship with God is of utmost importance to God. When we speak, we can count on God’s attention. So that’s about all we can say about the way prayer works, EXCEPT that we can trust in the goodness and love of God who listens to our prayers. And when prayers are unanswered for reasons we can not to understand, it will be God who gives us the power to respond to the things we are struggling with in our lives and in our world. In those times, it will be the power of Christ within us that will help us put one foot in front of the other toward a way, a door, a direction, a new way to imagine life where we can once again discover the light of healing, peace and abundant life. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 7/27/13

ENDNOTE

1. David Lose, “Teach Us to Pray” from his weekly article Craft of Preaching - Dear Working Preacher posted on www.workingpreacher.org on July 22, 2013

2. Lillian Daniel, from her sermon “The Power Source,” at the Festival of Homiletics, Nashville, TN, May 21, 2013