

What I learned about prayer during Mom's passing

by Nelson Townsend, on 7/11/2021, at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, OP, KS

Based on John 11:1-43

Eternal God, may our hope in your love and compassion be renewed through the hearing and understanding of your Word. Amen.

Opening

Dear Friends, I am not a Prayer Warrior. I'm more of a Prayer Practitioner. I know how to pray, basically, but I'm in no position to provide much guidance. Rather, this sermon is grounded in my experience during my mom's passing. And how my own prayers changed.

I love what a former Pastor of GCPC, Kimby Young, said about prayer: "Prayer works! But not like a washing machine."

I would say, "Prayer is much messier than a washing machine. But it gets similar results."

Overview

Mom's passing started like this:

I got a call from Dad at 8:50 in the morning on a regular workday.

It was Wednesday, May 8, 2019: A little more than two years ago.

Dad came home and found Mom laying on the kitchen floor flat on her back. Her eyes were open, but she was non-responsive. She couldn't speak. She could only move her right arm and leg.

Later that morning, doctors determined that she'd had a massive stroke and she could not swallow. The left side of her body was completely paralyzed. She could still hear and see, (and we knew) because Dad would ask her to grab his ear, and she would reach up with her right hand and grab it.

And he would ask, "Do you want a kiss?" And she would pucker right up.

But two physicians agreed: There was no rational, medical hope for her to get better. So he brought her home and we began hospice care for her. She was prescribed morphine for pain and Ativan for anxiety.

I drove down to Parsons – a two-hour trip for me. My brother Morgen and his wife were already on their way from Rock Springs, Wyoming – a 14-hour trip. Dad, my brother Morgen, and I (with the help of many family members and friends) cared for Mom until her death almost two weeks later on Monday, May 20.

We came right away, because we could and, like most people, that is where we thought we needed to be.

My first prayers

On my way to Parsons, my first prayers were for a quick, peaceful death. My prayers and thoughts were all about getting through this as easily and “painlessly” as possible.

I knew that her faith in God and Jesus was a comfort to her. I knew that she was not afraid to die. It was me who was afraid to watch her suffer. So, I prayed for courage, too.

So... in my prayers, I did not ask for a miracle. I did not ask for “just one more day.” Even then, I realized my prayers were as much for my comfort as for hers.

When Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill

Strangely, Jesus does not go immediately to Lazarus. Every time I read this story, this is the part that gets me. Verse six. Upon hearing that Lazarus was ill, Jesus stayed where he was for two more days.

We know that Jesus cared deeply for Lazarus; and Mary and Martha, his sisters, were practically disciples. Why did Jesus wait? *I do not think there is a “good” answer to this question.*

Wasn't Jesus worried about Lazarus? Didn't he want to be-there for his closest friends as their brother was dying? What we have in this text is simply this... Jesus said, “This illness isn't fatal. It's for the glory of God so that God's Son can be glorified through it.”

Ay! That is hard to take, because it is not our usual reaction to bad news.

Your mom has had a massive stroke. There's no hope of survival. I'm bringing her home and we're going to begin hospice care.

This is for God's glory?

Holy One, thank you for putting a wrinkle in how I thought this would work out...

Or maybe, instead, I could have used a line from the Lord's Prayer:

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done...

Perhaps the best prayers when we are in tough situations is acknowledging that everything is in God's hands – not trying to figure out what we think we need! THY kingdom come... not MY happiness come.

Pastor Marty's Prayer, Martha's lack of faith (and mine)

On the first evening, the Pastor from Mom's country church came. He was compassionate as he listened to Dad's story, which was still raw and tearful. Then he prayed with us.

It went something like this: “Father, we're so thankful we have a friend like Betty. We thank you for Betty: her life and ministry. And so, we pray blessings upon her. We pray, God, that you will minister to her in ways that will bring healing and health to her.”

That sounded a lot like my prayers. If you can like a prayer, I liked that prayer. But he... persisted.

“And we ask for a complete miracle to happen in her body and her life. We pray for complete healing. We pray that the capillaries in her brain open and send life-healing oxygen from her lungs, into her blood, and to her brain. And we ask this in Jesus’ name.”

And I thought, “That’s pretty specific. That’s not gonna happen.”

And it didn’t. I did not “like” that prayer.

In this story, because of my practical outlook, I identify with Martha. She does not seem to have much confidence in Jesus. When Jesus says, “Remove the stone.” Martha says, “Lord, the smell will be awful! He’s been dead four days.” I hear her saying, “I don’t think this is a good idea!”

I find it comforting that Jesus takes the criticism of his friends along with their lack of faith and performs a miracle anyway. So often, we hear Jesus say, “Your faith has made you well.” But not here. In John 11, despite their lack of faith, a miracle comes anyway.

Mary and Martha’s Prayer: Lord, if you had been here...

As I looked longer at the story of Lazarus, I heard every interaction as a prayer. Every back-and-forth as some mortal wrestling with the infinite. And the infinite trying to relate.

If you hear what Martha and Mary say to Jesus when he arrives in Bethany, you can hear the classic prayer, “God, where are you!”

First, it’s Martha who says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.”

And Jesus assures her, “I am the resurrection and the life.” This is one of many I AM statements that Jesus makes in John. And I think it should go a little like, Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life!” Boom! Drop mic! But there’s more to this story.

Next, it’s Mary who says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.”

Yet - Jesus does not reply directly to Mary. There is no real back-and-forth. When Jesus comes to the tomb and Mary meets him there, he soon breaks down and weeps with her. John writes, “he was deeply disturbed and troubled.” What I see is someone grieving because his friend is in anguish.

As I prepared this sermon, I came to find this verse (35) profoundly comforting. “Jesus started crying,” also translated, “Jesus wept.” This verse is much more than the answer to the trivia question, “What is the shortest verse in the Bible?”

I take it as an article of faith that God is everywhere, all the time, infinite in place and time. Therefore, God is with us – each of us – all the time. (That one is easy to believe in the abstract.)

But to the concrete questions “Why do bad things happen to good people? Why is there evil? Why did my mom have a stroke?” I have only scattered thoughts. I say, “God’s presence is a blessing.” But sometimes we don’t have the comfort of feeling God’s presence.

And I say God can take our anger and love us right back. And that is the good news in this story: God still loves us when we cry out in anger and frustration, “Where are you, God? I need you!”

Here is the incarnate God side by side with someone at the time of their deepest sorrow. God was right there, weeping and grieving with Mary at the tomb of Lazarus.

Getting mad – I mean really mad – is part of being human. God gets to be everywhere all the time. We are stuck in the here and now. We get mad at God. God loves us right back.

And when we are in anguish and sorrow, God is weeping and grieving with us.

My Second Prayer: Oh, God!

Let's get back to my story.

Around 5:30, on Monday, almost one week into Mom's passing, I was alone with her in the bedroom. I'd been watching her anxiously, because she had been struggling to breathe. She would usually gurgle as she breathed, a kind of snoring. But it was getting scary. I'd given her some morphine, but she hadn't relaxed.

Suddenly, Mom's face started to turn red, she squirmed in bed and tried to sit up.

I hollered, "Dad, could you call hospice?"

I asked, "What's wrong Mom?" And I was holding her right hand, but I had no idea what to do. Her face was bulging out, turning red, and the tendons in her neck were stretched tight.

So, I got in bed beside her, and I held her. Then, I cried out, "Oh, God!"

She sat up, coughed a couple of times. And laid back down. She relaxed and went back to her gurgling.

I said, "It's okay. It's okay." But really, it wasn't okay.

Very soon, the night nurse was there. She used a sponge on a stick to clear the gunk out of Mom's mouth.

She explained, "She just cleared a little phlegm. When she's laying down like that, some will get stuck at the top of her throat. And since she can't swallow, the only way to clear it, is to cough it out. Once she coughs it up, you can use the sponge, like this..."

And she showed me how to put the sponge in her cheek and twirl it. She wiped it off on a Kleenex and went in a couple more times.

She asked, "Okay?"

I said, "Okay. Thank you." And it was a lot better.

Was it a miracle that my mom managed to cough up a tablespoon of phlegm?

Was it a miracle that we had hospice care that would arrive within an hour?

Was it a miracle that we had those little sponges on sticks?

Was it my fault that I hadn't learned to use the little sponges on sticks yet?

Yes. That was my fault.

Was it an answered prayer when Mom was able to take another easy breath? Yes.

And it was an answered prayer that I learned another way to make her passing easier.

And it was an answered prayer that she stayed with us for another week.

When I shared this story with Pastor Mitch, he said something like, “That reminds me of the Lord’s prayer, when we ask for our daily bread. For most of us, it’s not much. It’s not a miracle, but it’s just exactly what we need.”

And I thought that is right. When we pray, we may be thinking we are asking for a miracle – or we may be afraid to ask for a miracle – and God may answer with a friend’s phone call, with the kindness of a stranger, the expertise of the nurse on duty, or a butterfly on milkweed.

But we should always have an attitude of gratefulness for what we have – and be mindful from where it comes. The Lord’s Prayer reminds us that God already provides us with everything we need.

Mom’s Trip to the Holy Land

In the Spring of 2000, Mom went to Israel, the Holy Land, and (at the time) I was too busy to go with her. Busy with a new job and busy starting my own family. She didn’t really ask, but when I found out she was going, I kind of thought, “Well, I’ll go with her the next time.”

Dad tells friends, “Betty’s most profound experience in the Holy Land was coming out of Lazarus’ Tomb.” And I understand that.

She went to Capernaum, where Jesus began his ministry on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Peter’s hometown; and Herod’s fortress, Masada, the last holdout of the Jewish rebellion against the Romans in 74 AD. (Which would have been my favorite because it is wicked cool!) She was at the Sermon on the Mount; the battleground of Armageddon; Jericho, where the walls came a tumblin’ down. She prayed at the Wailing Wall. She saw the Dome of the Rock. She visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher: the traditional site of Jesus’ crucifixion, His anointing after death, and His burial and resurrection. She went to the Garden Tomb, another possible site of Jesus’ entombment and resurrection.

But coming out of the tomb of Lazarus was her most profound experience.

And now, I still regret that I never asked her about it.

Mom’s Journal Entry

There is a Hellen Keller quote that I was introduced to in the wake of Mom’s passing:

“What we have once enjoyed we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us.”

After Mom passed, I went through her library and journals, looking for her words. And I’ve found many things that bring me comfort. But finally, an answered prayer: I found her journal from the Holy Land, and reading it is almost like hearing the stories that I never asked her to tell me.

Here are her words after encountering the tomb of Lazarus:

“Incredible experience – tomb is below ground, because of earthquakes, destruction and rebuilding. Twenty steps down... – cut out of stone. There are 3 or four more steps down into tomb – The original entrance to the tomb is walled up, but still there –

“The house of Lazarus has a church built over it and is not very far from the tomb. One family would have a family tomb – could be used over and over again...

“It was the most incredible feeling to look at those steps and the entrance and think – the steps of a man dead and alive again – he walked up these steps and out this door at the word of the One who says, ‘I am the resurrection and the Life.’ It’s the same miracle that happens to us – but it isn’t about Lazarus – The story is about Jesus.”

And yet... this is not a “happily ever after” story. I assume (without any record in scripture) that Lazarus dies anyway. I asked the google... and a predominant story is this: after his resurrection, which was not “good news” to Jesus’ detractors, he fled and moved to Cyprus with his sisters, where they continued their witness and ministry, establishing an early Christian community. Lazarus lived another 30 years.

With the benefit of hindsight, curiosity, and time on our hands, we have the privilege of wondering about Lazarus. But the story that John tells is not about Lazarus. As my mom noted, the story is about Jesus.

The story shows us that God and Jesus grieve with us.
It shows us unspoken, unhopd-for, life-changing prayers are sometimes answered.
It is a story that happened for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus,
And it can also happen for us.

Charge and Benediction

Like Thomas the Brave said, Let us go and die with Lazarus and Jesus.

Let us go and die to our old lives.

Let us boldly name the things that plague us... and ask for a complete miracle.

When you find yourself in chains, in a grave, listen for God to call your name, with the love, and care, and attention of a parent or friend.

Expect that stone to be rolled away.

Now, let us walk out into the light of a new day, where our God greets us with the words, “Unbind them! And let them go!”