

“Do It Anyway”

Of the many books written on the subject of prayer, one of the best is Richard Foster's book, entitled Prayer. One phrase that is powerful is when he says simply that prayer is the key to the *heart* of God. Indeed, prayer is one of the greatest gifts that we have been given. It is easily accessible, readily available, costs nothing and takes no special skills. Any one can do it any time.

Foster's descriptions paint a beautiful picture of the comfort that prayer can bring us. He does this by comparing the intimacy with God that prayer allows us to experience to actually being in God's house. He says that prayer allows us to come into God's living room where we can put on old slippers and share freely. That it brings us into God's kitchen where chatter and batter mix with good fun and into God's study where we can learn and grow and stretch. What lovely images for us to hold in our minds' eye.

As a pastor, I have been asked to pray for every occasion that you can imagine. Most of the people who seek prayer from me are in need of healing and comfort and a sense of the presence and peace of God. Their circumstances have varied from marriages that are crumbling, unplanned pregnancies, healing from sexual abuse, assurance in unemployment, strength in adversity, courage in addiction and faith in the face of an unexpected death.

On the lighter side, I have been asked to pray for dogs, birds, lost keys, lost glasses, lost hearing aids, and lost teeth. By the way, we found the teeth. Children have asked me to pray for soccer scores and football games. Brides have asked me to pray for

good weather. During the drought that we have experienced over the last year, I was asked often to pray for rain and this is understandable. My dad sent me an e-mail that explained that the drought was calling for drastic measures in the event of baptisms. It said that the Baptists have resorted to sprinkling, the Methodists are using wet wipes, the Presbyterians are handing out rain checks and the Catholics are turning wine back into water!

But an experience I had this week turned my heart to another kind of prayer. I have participated for about 11 years in a Women's Interfaith Book group. We have women from different faiths and read about the many religions throughout our nation and our world and then discuss the books together. We have read books about some faiths that I have never even heard of as well as sacred texts from Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Mormonism, the Baha'i faith and others.

This month we read a beautiful book entitled Threading my Prayer Rug written by a Muslim woman who moved here from Pakistan with her husband and started her family here in the United States. She is now an American citizen and writes of her experience of finding a faith community in America in the 70's and even still today.

She wrote about the way that September 11, 2001 changed the world for everyone and about the distrust and antagonism that now permeates our culture because of our misunderstanding of what the average Muslim really believes and practices. Our group invited a young woman to speak to us who moved here four years ago from Pakistan as well and how her story parallels the author's. Listening to her speak brought to mind a specific event in my own life.

I happened to be facilitating a Wednesday night prayer group at my home church in 2002 and the first anniversary of September 11th fell on a Wednesday. When we found out that the minister at our church was not planning a service to commemorate the event, we decided to hold a prayer service just for our group but before we knew it, the whole church wanted to come.

In order to have as much participation as possible, I asked different members of the class to volunteer to have a prayer for one specific need during the service. For example, one person would pray for families who had lost loved ones. Another would pray for first responders. As I went down the list of assignments and noted each volunteer's name, one man in our group said, "I would like to pray for our enemies." I was humbled and ashamed. You see, I had not included *them* on the list.

But right in Jesus' most well-known sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord instructs us to do just that. And after attending book group on Tuesday, I found myself drawn to Christ's words again.

One thing I noted as I studied is that Jesus does not tell us what kind of enemies we are to pray for. They could be national enemies, corporate enemies or personal enemies. The enemy could be one that led us into something sinful or one who has hurt our loved ones. The enemy could even be something within us. But our instructions are to pray!

Of course, Jesus not only asks us to pray, but prefaces his command with "Love your enemies!" Now that is a tall order. Jesus is basically telling us that we must regard our enemies as neighbors whom we love. By the way, this follows the admonition to hold our temper with our enemies and not retaliate for any wrong doing that has been

done to us. And added to that, now we must love them! Well, perhaps like me, your question is HOW? But Jesus says that will happen when we pray for them!

I think this might be what we can call radical prayer. But in a world where countries practice war rather than negotiations and religious extremists strap bombs to their bodies to make political points in the name of their god, perhaps some radical praying is called for. Karl Barth once said, “To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

Jesus knew that prayer was called for in order that the kingdom of God might finally be ushered in. And of course, he not only suggested it but he did it! And his action was very radical compared to some of the heroes of the faith written about in the Old Testament.

For example, King David pleaded, “Oh Lord, let my enemies be put to shame!” in his Psalm. The prophet Jeremiah once prayed, “Oh Lord, don’t ever pardon my enemies sins. Cause them to fall on their faces. Deal with them on the day when you are most angry!” And when one of King Josiah’s minions murdered one of his priests, the other priests bellowed, “May the Lord see this and avenge me!” These sound like the prayers that I would pray when someone wounds me or someone I love. But Jesus prayed for the ones who nailed him to the cross, “Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”

However, there is at least one Old Testament figure who seems to have the right idea. Moses. Moses was a Hebrew living in Egypt because his forefathers had come there when Joseph, great grandson of Abraham, was second in command to the King. So at that time, they were welcomed and respected.

But 400 years had passed by the time that Moses was born. The present King had no knowledge of the history of the Hebrew people and only saw them as a threat because of their vast numbers. Their lives were full of abuse and treachery at the hands of the Egyptians. However, the Bible tells us that God saw their misery and heard their cries and called Moses to lead them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

Most of us know that Pharaoh did not let the Hebrews go without a fight and God sent plague after to plague to convince Pharaoh to let His people go. In the particular plague that I read about this morning we hear that while no life or limb has been threatened, the land is COVERED in blood, frogs, gnats and flies. In fact, verse 24 says that the land was ruined!

Yet the Scripture also tells us that the Israelite people have been singled out for safety. While they stand in the Hebrew province of Goshen, God stops the flies before they enter there. So while Egypt is COVERED with flies, the Israelites are completely safe. It is as if a wall of flies is erected at the border of Goshen to protect God's chosen people.

The message for Pharaoh seems AT THIS POINT to finally be clear. He understands that God is sovereign and powerful and that He will do as he says. And so, in a desperate act, the Pharaoh goes to Moses and says, "Pray for me to your God." And friends, this story just stepped all over my toes.

First, how like the Pharaoh we are? We go along with our lives, business as usual, as long as things are going well. We are, after all, in charge of our own destinies. But when life becomes uncertain, when illness arrives, when the teeth are lost and 9-1-1-

occurs, **THEN** the first thing we do is go to God. We decide that God might be powerful after all and maybe we should give him a try.

The second thing about this story that was a real wake up call for me is that Moses did it. *He prayed for the Pharaoh.* And as a VERY HUMAN BEING, I do not think I would have been so willing to go to God on behalf of one who had caused my people such misery. But, God through Moses and Jesus instructs *us* to do just this. To pray for anyone who persecutes you. God KNOWS it is an abnormal response to ask us to love and pray for people who have hurt us, but he asks us to do it anyway!

Of course, as with any Biblical story, the star of the drama is God. He steals the show every time! In this story, God *does* answer the prayer of Moses and stops the flies from plaguing Egypt. So even though he has heard the misery of His people and has promised to deliver them, he also delivers the Pharaoh. And I believe that this is the source of the commandment from Jesus. By asking us to pray for our enemies, Jesus is reminding us of two things that might one day make a difference in this world, once we all realize it.

First, by praying for our enemies, we are reminded of our common humanity. Whether we want to admit it or not, even the brother who wrongs me, even the sister who lies to me, was created in the image of God. And second, praying for our enemies helps us remember that God loves US when WE have done wrong, so maybe, JUST MAYBE, God loves others too!

It is important to note that Moses was granted one privilege that we, sometimes, do not get to enjoy. He saw his prayers answered. But just because we cannot see or hear God answer our prayers does not mean we should give up on Him. After all, God

answers prayers according to HIS will which is so much better than mine. God knows what I need even when I do not and even when I ask for the wrong things.

So, whether we understand it or not, whether we see our prayers come to fruition or not, friends, we are called to pray. For rain, for illness, for those who are grieving, for lost people, for lost teeth and even for our enemies. We may not like it one bit, especially in times like the ones we are living in. But like Moses and Christ, we are admonished to do it anyway.

Some of you know that I am a huge country music fan. And as I wrapped up my thoughts about my enemies, past and present, one of Martina McBride's songs kept running through my head. Listen to the closing words of her song, "Anyway".

You can spend your whole life building something from nothing

One storm can come and blow it all away. Build it anyway.

You can chase a dream that seems so out of reach and you know
it might not ever come your way. Dream it anyway.

You can love someone with all your heart. For all the right reasons.

In a moment they can choose to walk away. Love them anyway.

And then the chorus:

God is great. But sometimes life ain't good. And when I pray, it doesn't
always turn out like I think it should. But I do it anyway. I do it anyway.

Friends, we are called this day and every day to pray for our enemies. We may not like it, understand it, or even believe in it but God is calling us to do it anyway! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.