

I received an email from one of our devoted members this week posing some questions about prayer. This young lady had received a request to pray for an injured child, suggesting that the more people who prayed for this child, the more likely God would bring healing and restore him to his family. Her question essentially was, why do we pray? Do we believe that because this particular child has hundreds of people praying for him that he will be saved, versus a Syrian refugee who no one is praying for? What does that say about a God who we believe loves everyone? Do our prayers determine what God decides? And if not, then what is the point of praying?

I found these to be profound, honest questions that I believe we all wrestle with at times. Prayer stands at the centerpiece of our faith, and yet for many of us it is a practice shrouded in mystery. And I thought those questions opened the door to a wonderful opportunity to share my thoughts with you.

I also struggle with the Facebook prayer chains that suggest that if a sick child can only get so many people praying for her that God will see fit to heal her. As if the little boy who was unlucky enough to be born to atheist parents and has no one praying for him will somehow not find the same favor with God. At the same time, I believe in the power of prayer.

I derive my understanding of prayer from my understanding of God. I do not believe God to be a Santa-like figure waiting to hear what I want, then determining whether to give it to me based on whether I have been bad or good, or how hard or often I pray. Instead I understand God as creator, redeemer and sustainer, who nonetheless desires to be in relationship with me. God chose to dwell among humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to light the way to that relationship. And just like a friendship, marriage -- practically any relationship I can think of -- cannot endure and grow without ongoing communication and time spent together, our relationship with God cannot grow without those things either. Prayer is our path to that relationship.

Prayer is about communication -- really nothing else. It's about building and growing a relationship by spending time together and sharing our deepest desires, hopes, dreams and fears with God. The purpose of prayer is to deepen our relationship with God, to grow closer and more intimate with Christ. That is the power of prayer. That if we are faithful in prayer and we believe that God hears our prayers, then that communication happens and the relationship deepens.

That works fine on ordinary days. But what about in the midst of crisis? When the child is sick and the news is grim and all hope seems lost? What do we pray for and what does it mean? If you are that child's parent, then you pray for a miracle, plain and simple. But it's the "why" behind the prayer that is critical. When that parent prays for healing, he or she is sharing their deepest, most desperate desire with God. What they are saying is, "God, I don't understand ... I can't handle losing him ... what I want more than anything is for him to be well ... I would do anything ... I would trade my life for his." It is a baring of the soul and a sharing of the rawest of emotion. That's intimacy. That's the purpose of prayer. Earnest prayer in those situations isn't "God if you are there you will grant me this miracle." It's "God I am so desperate, I am so scared, I would do anything to change this."

The biblical example is Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to his arrest. As the disciples sleep nearby, Jesus goes off alone to pray. He is fully aware of what lies ahead and what it means. And he cries out to God, "Father if it be your will, take this cup from me." In other words, "I don't want to do this. I am scared. Please don't make me do this." That is his heart. That prayer represents all of the fear and anxiety and dread he is experiencing. He shares that with God, because that's what you do with those who love you. But then he finishes the prayer ... "But not my will but your will be done." In other words, "I don't want to do this ... but I will ... because I know you are there and you will help me."

Prayer is an affirmation of that central tenet of faith. It is an acknowledgement that if God hears us, then we are not alone. And whatever we are facing, we do not face it alone. And it is a reminder that whenever we turn to prayer we are necessarily turning to God. Sometimes we turn in joy, sometimes in despair. Sometimes we turn in fear, sometimes in anger. But whenever we turn to prayer we turn to God. And our faith becomes real.

That's the power of prayer.

See you Sunday.