



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“Rhetorical Prayer”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Matthew 16: 21-23; Luke 22: 39-46

February 12, 2017

I would venture to say that nearly every married person (man or woman) in this room has, quite possibly more than once, uttered the phrase, “Why did you even ask me the question?” You all know, precisely, the conversation to which I am referring. “Honey,” one might say, “what do you think of this color for the living room?” “I don’t know,” the other might reply, “I’m not sure how well it will work.” “What do you mean you don’t know? Of course it will work! This would be a perfect color for that room!” It’s at that moment that the one throws up his or her arms and asks, “Why did you even ask the question if you didn’t want an answer?”

It doesn’t matter if you are discussing where to go out to dinner, what color to paint the kitchen, what outfit one should wear, or how to respond to that issue with your child – every married person in this room has found themselves in that moment in which his or her spouse has asked some question or another, only to cast the answer off as baseless and without merit. Every married person in this room has found themselves in that moment in which they have asked, “Why did you ask the question if you didn’t want an answer?” But, every person in this room knows the truth – the truth that the person never actually wanted an answer, they simply wanted someone to repeat that which they already had in mind! As a husband in particular, it seems the longer you are married, the more you learn that the path to a vital marriage is to express your opinion firmly, with profound conviction, when you know it agrees with hers, and to not have an opinion when it doesn’t!

Now, all joking aside, the truth is that we all do it. We all have those moments in which we put out questions (to our spouses, our parents, our children, our friends, our colleagues, etc...) – we all have those moments in which we ask questions in which we really don’t want their answer, we simply want them to affirm ours! And, as I have thought about this morning’s focus on Centering Prayer as our Ministry of the Month, the more I have been reminded that it is precisely this manner in which we so often come to God in prayer.

I call it the rhetorical prayer. We’ve all heard it. We’ve all done it. We’ve all come to God with some concern, fear, pain, sorrow, worry, struggle or other issue and laid it before God with faithfulness, devotion and heartfelt words. But, all the while, we’ve brought those issues to God

with our own understanding of what the resolution should be, what form God's answer should take, or what path God should place in front of us.

- We go to God with challenges in our workplaces, and we tell God, exactly, what God ought to do to fix those people who are causing the problems
- We go to God with struggles in our relationships and we proclaim, to God, what the solution to the tension is.
- We go to God with fear and worry, and we tell God what steps need to be taken to remove that fear and worry from our lives.
- We go to God with one problem after another, with faithfulness and devotion, and tell God exactly what we think should be done to tackle our issues.

And, you know what? That's ok! I think we often lose sight of the fact that it is ok to ask things of God. I think we often misunderstand the nature of prayer and think that it is somehow wrong, or faithless, to ask God for the resolutions and things we see as ideal for our lives. But, the Bible tells us the exact opposite. It is repeatedly stated, in Scripture, that God listens to the petitions of His people – and that's exactly what Jesus does when he drops to his knees in prayer at the garden at Gethsemane.

I included the prediction of his death, in our readings this morning, because I think it is an imperative element in understanding exactly what is going on with Jesus in this story. In the beginning of the Gospel According to John, John speaks of Jesus when he says that 'the Word became flesh.' What John is espousing, in that phrase, is the cornerstone theology of the true humanity of Jesus. Without getting into all sorts of heresies and early church doctrine, the fundamental understanding is that, while Jesus was God, Jesus was also fully, entirely, and undeniably human. As part of his endeavor to take on the sin of humanity, Jesus took on the reality of humanity. And, again, without jumping hip-deep in systematic theology, the end result is that Jesus (while connected to God in real and unimaginable ways) experienced life in the same manner we experienced it. He experienced pain as we experience it. He knew fear, as we know it. He knew temptation, and hunger, and love, and sorrow, and worry and everything else in the very same manner in which we know it. He experienced life as a human – which means he faced his pending crucifixion as a human.

I think we have to understand that to truly grasp the power of this prayer. Jesus had predicted, three times in fact, that he was going to be turned over and crucified. He knew this was coming. He knew what stood before him. And, having spent the earlier evening with Judas, he knew that time was coming tonight. And, he didn't want to go through it. I think we tend to forget the humanity of Jesus when it comes to this portion of the story, and we tend to gloss over the agony this was for him. He was in that garden, facing his arrest, abuse and death with the very same emotions and fears that we would know if we were in that garden ourselves, and he didn't want it – so he asked God if there was another way.

I think if there is any moment in Scripture that should give us the impetus, the permission, we need to come to God, genuinely, with our needs, it should be this. If there is any moment in Scripture that should make us feel comfortable coming to God with open hearts it should be that Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, dropped to his knees in the garden and prayed to God, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me." If we ever felt as though it was somehow faithless or

selfish to come to God with a genuine reflection of what we long for in our lives, the image of Jesus, himself, praying to God to save him from his fate should be everything we need to wipe that reticence from our minds.

But (you knew there was going to be a ‘but,’ there’s always a ‘but’), as we find, in this story, the permission we need to come to God with genuine prayers for our longings in our needs, we must also see the call to come to God with the full understanding that Jesus’ prayer in the garden came with two parts. “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” This is where we get back to our innate tendency to ask questions without any desire to actually hear the answers.

I think it’s true that, at times, we find ourselves reluctant to come to God with an honest rendering of what we long for in life. I think it’s true that we sometimes mask our desires in an attempt to be more ‘faithful’ by not asking for what we want. I think it’s also true, however, that whether we realize it or not, we often come to God with an assumption that the answer we want is the answer we’re going to get!

I can’t tell you how many times I have sat in my office, or in a hospital room, or in any of a number of other places, and held conversations with people in which they were questioning the fact that God wasn’t answering their prayers. Maybe the healing wasn’t coming in their time, or the job they prayed for didn’t come through, or the relationship they had been pursuing didn’t pan out. It has been countless things, but the underlying conversation is always the same. “I prayed for this,” they say, “and it didn’t come.” “I asked God for that,” they explain, “but it never happened.” All the while, it becomes increasingly clear that they never left room for the fact that God’s answer might not be the one they asked for!

The simple truth is that God answers prayers in three fundamental ways: ‘Yes,’ ‘No,’ and ‘Let’s try this instead.’ But, the other truth is that, more often than not, we only leave room for ‘yes.’ More often than not, when we come to God in prayer, we come with that specific longing we have in our needs, and we simply don’t leave much room for anything else.

- When God says ‘yes,’ we proclaim ‘Thank God for my answered prayers.’
- But, when God says ‘no,’ we keep praying waiting for God to say yes.
- And, when God says, ‘Let’s try this instead.’ We don’t even hear it.

“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” I truly believe that there is no greater summary of the foundational approach to prayer than this moment in the life of Jesus. Facing persecution, pain, and death, Jesus dropped to his knees and proclaimed to God his fear, his sorrow, and his longing to be spared from the fate that stood before him. In agony and terror Jesus asked that the cup of suffering be removed from his life. But, even amidst that profound desire to be spared of that suffering, Jesus submitted to the will of God no matter what answer God provided to the prayer he brought forth.

You know, the more thought I put into this message for today, the more I got this picture of God, looking down upon us, arms up, shouting, ‘Why did you even bother to ask me the question in the first place?’ I think it’s hard to miss that we have a proclivity for asking self-affirming rhetorical questions of one another. I think it’s hard to deny that we tend to ask each other

questions that we don't really want answered unless they get answered our way. I think it's also hard to deny, however, that we tend to come to God with the same intent, in our rhetorical prayers, as we come to God in prayer with full ideas of the answer we long to receive, and no real openness to the answer God will provide.

And, it's ok to come to God with our wants, with our longings, and with our perspectives on the best resolutions to the challenge we bring in prayer. But, it's only ok as far as we are willing to let go of those longings when God's answer is something different than we had hoped, or expected, to hear. "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." There's no place it's made more fundamentally clear that it is ok to ask. But, there is also no place it is made more fundamentally clear that once we ask, we need to actually listen for God's response, no matter how it measures up to what we wanted in the first place.