
Sermon
Unanswered Prayers?

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Hope Unitarian Church
October 11, 2009

First Reading: Job 28:12-22 (NRSV)

- ¹²But where shall wisdom be found?
And where is the place of understanding?
- ¹³Mortals do not know the way to it,
and it is not found in the land of the living.
- ¹⁴The deep says, "It is not in me",
and the sea says, "It is not with me."
- ¹⁵It cannot be bought for gold,
and silver cannot be weighed out as its price.
- ¹⁶It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir,
in precious onyx or sapphire.
- ¹⁷Gold and glass cannot equal it,
nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold.
- ¹⁸No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal;
the price of wisdom is above pearls.
- ¹⁹The chrysolite of Ethiopia cannot compare with it,
nor can it be valued in pure gold.
- ²⁰Where then does wisdom come from?
And where is the place of understanding?
- ²¹It is hidden from the eyes of all living,
and concealed from the birds of the air.
- ²²Abaddon and Death say,
"We have heard a rumour of it with our ears."

Second Reading: Wendell Berry. The Peace of Wild things.

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Third Reading: John Winthrop. A Model of Christian Charity. On Board the Arabella: 1630.

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.

Sermon

A few weeks ago I was in a bookstore checking out the new release table when a particular title caught my eye. It was, "Quitting Church". It's a book about why people are dropping out of churches. It may surprise you to know that the author – Julia Duin, the religion editor for the Washington Times and a person who appears to be fundamentalist and Pentecostal in her personal beliefs – was talking about people dropping out of conservative, evangelical and Pentecostal churches. It's common knowledge that membership in the mainline Protestant churches has been dropping like a rock over the last fifty years. The overall membership in absolute terms amongst churches that belong to the Unitarian Universalist Association is about the same as in 1961, but down just over forty percent as a percentage of the U.S. population. That's in sharp contrast with the commonly held belief that conservative or fundamentalist churches are growing. Turns out that's not true. There are many conservative or fundamentalist or Pentecostal churches that fall into the mega-church category, but such churches are suffering much the same fate as more liberal churches. They are having a difficult time retaining their youth. They attract kids and parents with indoor playgrounds and food courts and video arcades and a host of events that are more entertainment than church. And the kids enjoy it until they become adults and begin to drop out. There are similar problems with their adult members.

As I read the book I had to peel away much of the author's personal theology that is about as far removed from mine as one can get. Having done that I came to the conclusion that people are dropping out of her kind of church for the same reason they are dropping out of my kind. She lists several issues, but let me talk about just two of them. The first is a general category of the church as not relevant to the lives of people. The second – an issue she mentioned repeatedly – is what she called the problem of unanswered prayers. I think the two are closely related.

You may wonder about the problem of unanswered prayers and what that has to do with Unitarians. The author of "Quitting Church" unequivocally embraces belief in a personal God and intercessory prayer – the belief that there's a God up there and his request line is open. If you can get through to him and you're caller number three and if you pray and believe properly you will be healed of your disease, you'll become rich and your football team will win this weekend by at least four touchdowns. I believe the majority of Unitarians do not believe in that kind of God nor in intercessory prayer. At the same time I believe it's important to recognize that everyone – and I do mean everyone – prays. It doesn't matter if you believe in one God or a thousand gods or

none at all. It doesn't matter if you 'believe' in prayer or 'don't' – each of us prays. Perhaps you don't believe me. Okay. How many of you have ever bought a lottery ticket? - how many of you want Oklahoma to win next weekend? Is there anyone here who doesn't want good health and happiness?

Each of us gives voice – silently or otherwise – to our most deeply held concerns and hopes and dreams and wishes. It doesn't matter if anyone is listening. We pray. Every hope and desire we have is a prayer. We pray that we will get into the school of our choice. We pray we will meet the person of our dreams. We pray that life will be good. We pray we will get the job we've always wanted. We pray we will get that raise. We pray we won't get sick. We pray those we love won't die. We pray we won't get cancer. We pray we will be healthy, wealthy and wise. We pray our candidate will win the election. We pray we will win the lottery. We pray our marriages and relationships will be good and lasting. We pray our children will prosper and do better than we have and they will live long and prosper. We pray for things that are serious. We pray for things that are silly. We pray. We pray each and every day.

And not all our prayers are answered. We set our hearts on dinner at our favorite restaurant only to drive across town and discover it's closed. Those we love die despite our most fervent prayers and hopes. We lose jobs. Marriages disintegrate. Tornadoes come like the wrath of God and wipe homes and lives from the face of the earth.

Forest Church is often quoted as saying religion is the human response to being alive and knowing you are going to die. We're not going to live forever. None of us. Most of us are not going to get everything we want. There are some people who seem to come close. But life – at its best – is usually like that line from The Rolling Stones: "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you might find you get what you need." But sometimes you don't even get what you need. Sometimes life sells you short because life is cold and cruel and indifferent. And the human response – is to try to understand why.

Some religions will assure you that if you're prayers aren't answered it's because you're in the wrong. You don't hold the right beliefs, you don't belong to the right kind of church and God's dishing out the punishment you deserve. It's a problem as old as the story of Job, a problem that is at the heart of being human, at the heart of knowing we are alive and having hopes and dreams and living with the reality that sometimes we come up painfully short. The book of Job has often been called the greatest work of human literature. I don't think it's because it's well written – I think it's called that because it is an unflinching look at the problem of unanswered prayers, at the problem of life gone terribly wrong when we know – we know – as Job did – with absolute certainty that we haven't done anything wrong. And what does the story of Job tell us? Truth be known the story doesn't have an answer. There's a great speech at the end with words put into the mouth of God all about, "Where were you when I created the heavens and the earth?" It suggests that there's a master plan we're not smart enough or wise enough to understand. That's not an answer. Those words are the character of God evading Job's demand for an honest answer with bluster and bullying.

This morning's reading from the book of Job are words spoken by the character of Job himself – Job, the perfect man who has suffered horror after horror, all of his prayers denied. And what does Job say? He speaks of wisdom.

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And where is the place of understanding?
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Job wants to understand why. He wants to make sense of the calamities that have befallen him. He wants there to be a reason for it. But there's not. In the story itself Job is beset with one disaster after another because of an experiment conducted by God and an angel, The Satan. It is an absurdity meant to be taken as representative of the absurdity and capriciousness of life.

Despite all the claims made by the different characters within the story I believe this is the essential message of Job: There is no wisdom – divine or human – that can tell us why some prayers are answered and others are not. Sometimes the wicked will prosper. Sometimes the righteous will suffer. There is no logic to it. There is no divine judge, no God ready to take your call and answer your prayer. We live in a universe that is cold and impersonal. The idea that there exists wisdom to explain it all is just a rumour that we've heard, but it's not real. For myself, I see no evidence that the universe is concerned with my well being or the well being of anyone else. How, then, should we respond? What should be the answer of the church? – an answer that will be relevant to our lives, the reality of lives that are filled with ups and downs that are too often random and make no sense?

One possibility is for the church to preach a dogma, a doctrine, a creed, a mantra to be repeated over and over again to mask the pain. Don't worry, be happy. This life isn't important. If you have unanswered prayers you just need to pray harder and if they're still not answered in this life they will be answered in the next. Another approach is that of stoicism. Don't worry – just suck it up, stop feeling sorry for yourself, or feel sorry for yourself if you must, but just keep on going. I don't find those alternatives attractive. But there's another way. Several years ago, then President Reagan made famous the words of John Winthrop:

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.

Mr. Reagan took those words as pointing to American exceptionalism. But there's a problem. Mr. Reagan lifted those words out of context. Read in their full context they actually contradict the political philosophy he espoused. Read in their full context they are a theological argument for an understanding of the nature of church as community. Winthrop recognized that his followers – the Puritans – faced great difficulties. Many of their prayers would not be answered, a prospect he described as a 'shipwreck'. This was his solution:

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body.

In case you missed it, I believe that is an argument not just for a public option, but a public mandate for universal health care. It is an argument that says their salvation, the answer to their unanswered prayers is not to be found in doctrine or dogma or ideology, but in community – the community that celebrates together, mourns together and works together for the common good. He is arguing that their community – their religious community – must be just – a group of people committed to working together for the common good. That is their obligation. That is why he said, "we shall be as a city upon a hill."

Such a community will not solve all of our problems. There will continue to be unanswered prayers. Such a community will not heal ever hurt nor right every wrong. Such a community will not bring back the dead or restore marriages. But in such a community we can teach other and help each other to live just lives, to love mercy and to work together for the common good. We can be there in the best of times and the worst for one another. We can be a community that rejoices in the triumphs of each person and labors together to overcome shortcomings and failings alike.

While such a community will not solve all problems, it is what we must be, what we must become because the eyes of the world are upon us. And if we remain uncertain in the face of the certainty that we shall not be able to set every wrong right, then we should remember the words of Edward Everett Hale: "I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything; but still, I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." That is the spirit of a city upon a hill, that is the spirit of a church upon a hill. It is why this church – it is why all churches worthy of their name, no matter their theology – liberal conservative or

otherwise - are first and foremost about the spirit of community. They are places where the stranger in search of Job's rumour of wisdom can rest in the grace of community.
Amen.