

'Praying for a Change' The Revd Dr. Rebecca Dudley, Knox Church, Dunedin, Sunday 2 May 2021

Mark 9: 14 - 29

[Everyone in the congregation has been given a short piece of string].

It is a pleasure to be with you this morning. Before we start, I would like to invite you to take your small bits of string and make a knot, or knots. How tight is up to you. Hold on to it. Feel it. We will come back to it when we pray for others.

I am a morning person. I love the possibilities and the starting fresh.

The Christian traditions tell us the mercy of God is new every morning. And every New Year's day we start fresh too. But last year, January 1 2020, felt different. Perhaps like many of you, I woke up and looked out the window seeing what seemed at first a golden haze. From a distance a beautiful sunrise, maybe. Then I looked for the sun. I couldn't find it. This wasn't the sunrise. Slowly it dawned on us that it could be the bushfire smoke, all the way from across the Tasman, in Australia. And so we had a few days of murky haze to start the year.

....

'I am signaling you through the flames

I am signaling you through the flames

The North Pole is not where it used to be

Manifest destiny is no longer manifest....' as we read the words of Lawrence Ferlinghetti this morning to begin our Call to Worship.

I think most of us who follow the news of the world, and even those of us who don't, might agree that even if we are personally doing ok, the larger landscape of the times in which we are living can be chaotic and frightening; with fires and floods and conflicts and climate change. 2020 started with old conflict and new fires and floods, and trends toward continued warming and more frequent disasters, health emergencies made worse by broken systems, overlapping with war. And that's even before the world was engulfed in a global pandemic. In case this all sounds very gloomy, I perhaps should tell you this is my day job. I work with the Red Cross, with legal frameworks that can help vulnerable people in humanitarian emergencies (refugee law, International Humanitarian Law, human rights).

So, and you may see where I am going with this... here is a knotty problem.

How do we pray in terrible times?

A sense of fearfulness about the future seems to be in the air. As one example, I would like to share with you a report from the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement early last year (Survey Millennials and War):

As background, we have the term 'Millennials' from marketing people; it refers to adults who are now about mid 20s to mid 30s. A survey of more than 16,000 millennials in 16 countries and territories last year – roughly half in peace, half experiencing conflict – commissioned by the International Committee of the Red Cross, explored millennials'

views on conflict, the future of warfare and the values underpinning international humanitarian law, such as the use of torture against enemy combatants.

The results indicate that millennials are nervous about the future, and heightened tensions globally are likely to deepen these fears.

A plurality of respondents, 47 percent, think it's more likely than not that there will be a third world war in their lifetime. And although 84 percent believe the use of nuclear weapons is never acceptable, 54 percent believe it is more likely than not that a nuclear attack will occur in the next decade.

So we ponder these knotty problems. Hold on to those. These are difficulties.

We started with the question: how to pray in these times. I would like to talk a little now about the **WHY** and the **HOW** of prayer; WHY we should pray, and then talk about HOW we can pray.

Why pray?

In Mark's Gospel, chapter 9, we heard a story about how Jesus heals a boy of an evil spirit after his disciples had failed. When the disciples ask what they had done wrong, Jesus says, 'This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.'

About twenty years ago, we came across this text while I was working on other huge issues on poverty and inequality. This text helped our understanding of prayer in the face of huge and overwhelming problems of the world. I just want to say a few things about this story.

1. Firstly, we know that these ancient scriptures and then later historically in Christian tradition, we have blurred the line between mental illness and spiritual possession. I am not sharing this story to keep that message alive. I don't understand mental illness; modern science has found ways to try to understand some ways the body and brain function but Over time medicine, and law and our understanding has developed to separate out mental ill health from the persistence of evil, wrong choices, their evil consequences.
2. Secondly, notice that while we might understand a bit about mental ill health, we still don't understand the persistence of evil, wrong choices and evil consequences.
3. Thirdly, sometimes, in fact, many times in life, we are not big enough to handle the scale of how wrong things can go. We are so small and the problems of the world are so big.
4. Sometimes things are such a mess that prayer is the only thing for it.
5. In fact, as Jesus says in this story, some of the evils we face cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.

When we worked with this scripture 20 years ago, we had another insight. Sometimes we think the opposite of prayer is action. I would like to propose to you that the opposite of prayer is not action. I have learned that the opposite of prayer is despair, thinking that we are all alone, that we can do nothing.

Involvement in the world leads disciples to prayer. We are not easily driven to our knees. **We are not easily driven to our knees.** May I say in passing, Presbyterians are never driven to our knees. I sometimes go to Anglican and Catholic churches because they have kneelers.

About now, some of you may be thinking, 'But nothing happens when we pray.' I would challenge that idea. As we explored it, we found a few things that can happen during prayer.

1. First, prayer reminds us that we are not alone. God is with us. We are part of many communities, not least the worldwide Christian Community. We are not alone. /////
2. Second, in prayer, we can nourish a steady hope for renewal of this world God loves so much. /////
3. Third, in prayer, with God with us, we confront head on the causes of evil. /////
4. And finally, in prayer, we are drawn into God's will for the world God loves so much. So, if involvement in the world leads us to prayer, prayer leads us the other way, back into the pressing issues of this messy chaotic world God loves so much.

Its not too complicated.

It might help to remember that others have been in terrible times before us. You can find a verse in scripture. The Psalmist is often overwhelmed by wickedness and despair and found poetry for the ages in it: My prayer now for being overwhelmed comes from Psalms (119: v133) Order my steps and do not let evil have dominion over me.

Why pray? Sometimes, maybe often, because the job is too big for us. Sometimes when I am very low, I just pray this:

God, this is too much for me. I need to hand this over to you.

So why pray? One reason we pray is that the challenges we face are so big and we are so small. Now HOW to pray.

How to pray

To explore this question, we are going to draw on the traditions and resources of our faith to consider how we pray in terrible times.

First, we remember what prayer is. Christians have often described it as a 'Conversation with a purpose. The purpose is to offer ourselves to be changed.' Or if you prefer Richard Foster, in his book on Leadership: 'God is always speaking, always doing something. Prayer is to enter into that activity.' Padraig O' Tuama, an Irish theologian and poet, says:

'Prayer is rhythm. Prayer is comfort. Prayer is disappointment. Prayer is words and shape and art around desperation, and delight, and disappointment, and desire.

Prayer can be the art that helps you name your desire, and even if the desire can only be named, well, naming is a good thing, surely. Naming is what God did, the Jesus tell us, and the world unfolded. Naming things is part of the creative impulse.'

How do we pray? Well, as I said a few minutes ago, it is super easy. That is, it is super easy and will take your whole life to learn. In terms of practices of prayer as Henri Nouwen wrote, 'The only way to pray is to pray. The only way to try is to try.'

We already have some clues in the service we have been worshipping in together. Prayer traditions: are reflected in the order of service, and in the short prayers we already talked about.

First, **naming** who you are speaking to:

God or Jesus. Your friend, your creator, redeemer, sustainer.

Then you might say, '**I don't know what to say.**' That's ok. The Apostle Paul has been there before us and promised that the Holy Spirit will intervene for us and pray if we don't have the words for what is on our hearts (Romans 8: 26- 27).

Then we might say:

I am here. You are here: Pray to feel God's presence with you. That's **invocation**.

Then we might continue to **Adoration: I love you**, as our young friend said just now. Or, you are amazing.

Invocation, adoration.

The '**Thank you: Praise and thanksgiving**. Try to wake up with praise and go to bed with thanksgiving. This is a way to reframe our thoughts to. To identify what we are thankful for can turn grumpiness to gratitude.

Invocation, adoration, thanksgiving.

Then **I am sorry: Confession**. We are part of the brokenness and want to be part of the healing of this old world. Invocation, adoration, thanksgiving, confession.

Then maybe, 'Help me. Help us.'

That is Intercession: Naming the desires of our hearts for the places we are and for this world that God loves so much. Being bold. As Walter Wink wrote, History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being.

I am here. You are here. You are amazing. Thank you. I am sorry. Help us.

And finally, **blessing. I wish you well, I wish you healing**.

Blessing is about wishing well, and healing. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about how blessing can heal a broken world and I would like to close with his words. Most of us know that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed in 1945 because he took part in a plot to kill Hitler. His engagement to counter the Nazis started many years before that in the early 1930s. Over time his church broke with their denomination and he began running a clandestine seminary. Then the new seminary was outlawed, the building shuttered and leaders arrested. So they met in a remote farmhouse as war grew more and more likely. Here is what he wrote as the storm clouds threatened in 1939:

'The world lives and has its future by means of the blessing of God.... Blessing means laying one's hands on something and saying, 'You belong to God in spite of it all.' 'This is the way we respond to the world. We do not forsake it or condemn it.

Instead, we recall it to God, we give it hope, we lay our hands on it and say God's blessing come upon you

May God renew you, you dear God created world

For you belong to your creator and redeemer.

And he continues, 'We can do this because we have been blessed ourselves.'

And whoever has been blessed must pass on a blessing.

The renewal of the world, which seems impossible, becomes possible in the blessing of God.'

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

[Hymn: What a Friend we have in Jesus

Prayer for Others: In conclusion to the sermon, Rebecca invited the congregation to build a prayer based on the traditions and words we had discussed together, while we unknotted our string, or indeed turned it over to God if the knots were too tight.]

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