

“Not a Solitary Endeavor”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

A little boy named Johnny had been pestering his parents for a long time that he'd like to have a baby brother, like his friend Billy had. Johnny didn't realize this, but his Mom was pregnant. He kept pestering and pestering. Finally his Dad said, "All right, Johnny, start praying hard for two months. If you really want a little brother. Let's see what God does."

Johnny responded eagerly to his dad's challenge and went to his bedroom early that night to start praying for a baby brother. He even prayed multiple times during the day - but no way for a sister, just a baby brother, because that's what five-year-old little boys want: a little brother. [Laughter]

After about a month he became a little skeptical and finally he just kind of gave up. So, lo and behold, one day Johnny's mom gave birth. Johnny ran up to the room after his mom got home. His dad said, "Prayer really works, Johnny. Look." And his dad pulled the blanket back, and there were twin boys. Johnny looked and looked. Then he turned to his father and asked, "Aren't you glad I quit praying when I did?"

You have to watch that prayer thing. You never quite know what is going to happen.

When I was a little boy we moved all of the time so we went to different churches. But, when I was maybe 6 or 7, up through maybe 8 or 9, I had a Sunday morning ritual. We went to church in whatever town we were living in - at the Presbyterian Church - and then I would watch TV, because I was a child of that generation. That was my babysitter, I think in retrospect.

Sunday morning television, when I was growing up, wasn't the way it is now. You didn't have 150 channels, and Netflix, and whatever else you can turn on. You had three maybe four channels. So, on Sunday morning you had church, church or church. I watched Oral Roberts' "Expect a Miracle" television channel and it was really good. You kind of knew he was a charlatan - even at [my] age of 6 or 7 - but he was just great. He was so interesting. He waved his hands and he would say, "Touch the TV," (and I would touch the TV) and I could expect a miracle - so I did it all of the time. No one else ever told me to touch the TV. I didn't need a miracle, but I did it anyway. His son Richard and his wife would dance and sing like Donnie and Marie Osmond. It was just really cool stuff, and that is how I learned to be a minister. [Laughter]

It was the strangest thing, because they didn't do that at the Presbyterian church; but if the Presbyterian church had been on TV, I would probably still want to watch Oral Roberts. I was too young to understand theology, but I could understand a good-time show, and, man he gave us one! It was so interesting and I had more fun watching it. One thing I learned from Oral Roberts was prayer - because Oral Robert's prayer had power; prayer had meaning and made a difference in people's lives. When I was at the Presbyterian churches it was mumble, mumble, mumble. I would look around and didn't get much from that. But, man, I got a lot from Oral Roberts when he was praying, because he promised people's lives would change. He even said one time he could raise somebody from the dead. I mean,

I wanted to be there for that so I never missed an episode. You never knew what was going to happen.

Sometimes we, as Presbyterians, have lost some of that Pentecostal feeling because we pray, but we are never sure anything really happens - never really changes anything; and the Centurion was so trusting that he understood what prayer could do. He believed, when the other Jewish people didn't believe that prayer really made a difference. But, he did. He understood the power and the challenge that that could create. It creates a whole lot of theological problems at the same time.

Pelagius was this ancient theological figure. He got himself in a whole lot of trouble. They called him a heretic because he believed that our own good character, our good deeds and our ardent prayers could make a difference and really create our own healing and provide our own salvation. If we were just faithful enough. If we were just strong enough prayer warriors - to use an Oral Roberts' kind of language - we could heal through God's power.

Well, there were people like Saint Augustine, and later Martin Luther, and others who just could not stomach that theology, because if you could do it yourself, then you could control and manipulate the mind, heart and will of God, and that could never happen. According to good, reformed Protestants, that could *never* happen.

So Pelagius had his issues and got called a heretic. Pelagius - and later Oral Roberts - were preaching some of the same kind of language. If you just pray the right way, Oral Roberts, if you just put your hand on the television, or better yet, if you pay \$100 for that cloth that you hold in your hand while you are praying, then Oral Roberts [mimicking Oral Roberts] "has touched you through the living God. You, too, can feel the healing message and expect a miracle in your life." Boy, it just feels so good to say that. [Laughter]

But that isn't how it works. That's why we are sitting here and not at the Assembly of God Church or the Holiness Church down the road - because we believe that we do not have that power; that control. We have to hand it over to a living God who loves us, has our best interests, sees the larger picture in our lives and - in this world - heals, or doesn't heal, but always listens, loves and responds.

I would love to believe that Oral Roberts was right, because then I could control my salvation. I would love it if Oral Roberts was right, because then I could ask for the prayers and then, if I could become faithful enough, the people I cared about could be healed. The more I think about it the less I want to be or experience an Oral Roberts kind of faith, because I am never going to be good enough, faithful enough, a prayer warrior enough to heal anybody. And then, I have taken the power away from God and held it for myself. I am never [going to be] good enough to do that.

Thankfully, I can rely on a God who will listen to my prayers in spite of my sin. I can trust in a God who cares deeply about the flawed me. I don't have to be perfect to be heard and healed. I don't have to say it right or it is not listened to. I don't have to pay the right kind of money to get the right kind of cloth or the right kind of cable channel that channels the spirit of the living God through my hands through that TV set. Thank goodness for that! We are blessed with a loving God who listens to our needs and who answers our prayers -

whether we realize it or not - and loves us and carries us through difficult times, cries with us, laughs with us and hopes with us and, every prayer we share is answered.

Now, on this Memorial Day weekend, I may have just offended someone because I'm sure there were people praying for veterans or people in war that didn't come home. Their prayer wasn't answered, or so they thought. Prayers don't work that way, because God doesn't work that way. We have to have the trust that God (a:) exists, (b:) still works in this world, and (c:) has the bigger picture in mind.

Sometimes when you look back on your life, the greatest trials and tribulations in your life were actually the most profound and most meaningful moments. If you had prayed those problems away, so you experienced the perfectly easy life, you would not be as mature, or as faithful and as trusting as you are today.

This is a hard one to preach on Memorial Weekend because, how could someone's death ever be the right answer from God? All I can say is "I don't know." That's not a good response. It doesn't get me a whole lot of extra money and people aren't going to put their hand on my TV set. But the answer is: I trust in a God that I don't understand.

I believe that God - and I have an expectation of God that God will listen - will care, and that God will respond. I can't have an expectation and believe that God will answer it just the way I am asking, because I'm not smart enough, I'm not faithful enough and I don't have a view large enough to trust that my understanding is the same as God's. And finally (and I don't get this necessarily from this passage), all I get from this passage is that God has the power to heal even through Jesus Christ, and that God sometimes doesn't.

But I wanted to talk about what happens when God doesn't [answer]. To be a person of faith, you have to trust that death is not a failure. We can pray all day long. I have done it so many times just like you have - hundreds [of times] that you can't even count. How many times you have prayed for someone not to be taken from you?

But death is not a failure. Death is the ultimate victory because then we no longer have to suffer in this world. We are free from sin and brought into newness of life. We find that perfection in the resurrection and in God's embrace eternally.

That doesn't mean we have to like the injustices and the way some people die; the way some people die too young, or too brutally in unfair wars. It is horrible. If we only have an earthly perspective, I don't blame anyone for giving up on God, for not answering prayers just the way we want it. You have to have an eternal perspective. We have to view life beyond just the one that we have right here - right now - in this place. Life, hope and love. God is seeing and answering our prayer on a much greater level.

When we were little children and we wanted something, mom and dad were often so mean because they just didn't give it to us and we knew they could. But when they made a decision not to - you only realize this when you are a parent - it was harder for the parent not to give in, than it was to give in and give their child whatever they wanted so - if no other reason - they [the children] would just shut up. It takes a lot of strength for a parent to say, "No. Love me anyway."

The next time you feel that your prayer isn't answered, what is God saying "no" for, and "love me anyway"? It's in that search, in that reflection, that often we find the true deed in eternal love and the answer to prayer that we have been waiting for all of this time. Hold firm. Pray more. Trust. God is listening and God is answering. Amen