



"Change"

Scripture – Isaiah 58:1-9

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, September 19, 2021

Did you go to the circus when you were young? Raise your hand. Do you remember the ringmaster directing your attention to the acrobats on the high wires? Perhaps you remember a tiger leaping through a circle of fire. You're bound to recall the clowns whose antics kept the crowd roaring with laughter.

I remember the miniature clown car zipping around the arena and when it stopped, the clowns began pouring out. Even though the car was not much larger than a go-kart, it was stuffed with clowns. At first glance, I thought there must be six of them crammed into that tiny car. And then they climbed out: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, wait, they are still more, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve. How did they cram all of those bodies into that miniature vehicle? It was quite a spectacle. What do you remember about the circus?

A colleague, Otis Moss III, remembers that when he was young, his godfather would take him every year to Barnum and Bailey's Circus. He loved everything about it, but he was especially captivated by the elephants. I, too, am enthralled by those mammoth beasts.

Moss was fascinated by the elephants because they were enormous and possessed such power, yet they would obey this small man who had nothing but a whip and a chair. Moss was baffled. He was also nervous because he usually sat in the third or fourth row and when these massive animals lumbered out, he wondered if this might be the moment of an elephant coup d'état. He figured there was little the audience could do if the elephants decided to stage a rebellion.

As a young boy, he struggled to comprehend why an animal that possessed such brute strength would bow to a little man. "His godfather explained that the elephants had been trained since infancy to accept the commands of their trainer. When they were small, they had chains put around their necks. The circus had thrilling moments and funny moments, but behind the scenes, they also had cruel moments.

The chains were no longer than 12 feet long. At some point, after the animals had been living with the limits of the chains for years, they would remove the chains, but the elephants still lived with the mentality of their limitations."¹

It makes me wonder what chains might be limiting each of us. Is something stifling you from becoming the person God wants you to become? What would happen if you realized that the chains that hold you back and keep you just as you are, exist only in your mind?

Last week I talked about the importance of deepening our spiritual lives. Many in our society are aware that something is missing. There is a void that our rational, secular and affluent culture cannot adequately fill. Many have a hunger deep within that is not being fed.

That's because we are not merely physical and emotional creatures. We are also spiritual beings who occasionally pause to ask: What is my purpose? Where can I find true joy? Which path should I take? We discover answers when we engage in spiritual practices such as worship, reflecting on Scripture, and sharing God's love with others. Today we focus on the necessity of prayer.

You may have heard about the family who gathered around their dining room table for dinner, and the nine-year-old son blurted out, "It's my turn to say the prayer!"

Mom replied, "Go for it."

Instead of his usual, "God is great, God is good," he asked if he could say the Lord's Prayer.

"Of course," Dad said.

The family bowed their heads and he began to pray. "Our Father, who art in heaven." He stumbled a bit over "hallowed" but kept going. Then, he said what he thought he had heard others say: "My kingdom come. My will be done."

His parents chuckled at his youthful mistake. But, after dinner when the parents were alone, the mom said, "Our son's mistake made me think. How often do we act as if we are praying, "MY kingdom come, MY will be done?"

My or Thy. Such tiny words. Such an enormous difference. Is it all about me and what I want, or is life richer, happier, and more hopeful when I live God's way? We can try to live as if we are the center of the universe. I can imagine that all of my interactions with others begin and end with me. Prayer helps us climb out of this mindset. Prayer can open a pathway where we can feel the real joy and satisfaction that comes with acts of kindness to others.

People of faith have often believed that if they are in the midst of a disaster, the solution is to pray for God to straighten everything out. However, today's text from Isaiah questions this premise and pushes us to consider whether our Creator is supposed to deliver what we ask or is expecting **us** to take action.

Many Christians act as if one of their basic religious duties is to inform God of what needs to be done, as if the Maker of heaven and earth has gotten up in years and the divine short term memory is waning.

Some prayers are as silly and as selfish as "Lord, I really need a parking place close to the building this morning." Some try to gain leverage by bargaining: "If my loved one survives this surgery, I will go to church every Sunday." A better prayer is to shift the focus from ourselves to the welfare of others. "Please feed the hungry and end the wars." Yet, even these prayers miss the mark. They are much like the prayers of the Hebrew people in today's passage. Their prayers were simply righteous-sounding words tossed at heaven; they were not heartfelt feelings of mercy arising from their souls.

If their prayers were sincere, their behavior would change. They would stop oppressing their workers. They would feed the hungry. They would house the homeless. God expects our prayers to change our heart, mind, and soul because such a transformation will propel our hands and feet. God does not want us to simply pray for Afghan refugees. God wants our prayers to inspire us to care for a refugee family.

If you only take away one thing from today's sermon, make it this: Prayer is not designed to change God. Prayer is intended to change you.

Prayer does not make God aware of something God has overlooked; neither is God withholding grace until we ask with the proper piety. Prayer should change us.

In his book, *How God Changes Your Brain*, neuroscientist Andrew Newberg tells of doing brain scans on Catholic nuns and Buddhist monks who had prayed regularly for years. "Compared to an average human brain, the scans of the nuns and monks revealed a striking difference. The part of the brain that focuses on self was diminished and the part of the brain that focuses on others was enhanced. A regular prayer life had changed their brains."²

Prayer not only changes the physical structure of the brain; it transforms our character. It can be sudden. I've known people battling addiction who underwent a quick transformation. But I suspect that for most the change is gradual. It may not even be noticed over a handful of weeks. But looking back months or years later, the transformation can be striking.

In the book, *Kafka on the Shore*, we find this gem of wisdom: "Once the storm is over you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in."³

If you have weathered a harsh blow in life, you know it changes you. It changes the way you think about life, how you view your life, and how you view other people.

We have 24 hours each day. If we can set aside a few minutes to give thanks for the blessings of our lives, to reflect on the life of Jesus and his impact on our own life, and to consider how we can become the best version of ourselves, over time we will discover that we are not the same person as when we began. So, if you are not open to personal transformation – if you imagine you are already your finest self – do not get too serious about prayer.

Author Susan Sparks says that when she needs to be reminded of the power of prayer, she does not turn to Kierkegaard or Augustine or any towering figure in theology. She does not browse a book, turn to a TED Talk, or investigate the Internet. For that matter, she sidesteps human beings altogether and refrains from any written matter.

Susan lives in Manhattan. That is, the Manhattan that is spelled with an "a," not the one spelled with an "e," the home of Kansas State whose football team looks a little shaky this year. Sorry, I digress.

Susan lives in the Big Apple, so when she needs to be reminded of the workings of prayer, she treks to the Astor Place Kmart on the lower east side of Manhattan. Specifically, she walks to a "far back corner of the store that is devoid of windows or natural light. There, you will find the most unexpected thing – a plant nursery."

She ponders “the tender green leaves of ficus trees and the vibrant blossoms of marigolds. A tiny plastic tab peaks out of each pot with an image of what that particular plant could grow into if it received the proper light and care; a cruel irony, as there is little hope in this place that such care or light will be offered. Yet even amidst the bleak circumstances, these tiny members of creation still struggle, every moment of every day, to tap into the energy around them so that they might grow into that potential. In short, they pray.... They pray in a most basic organic way.”⁴ They seek the light and energy around them and strive to grow into their fullest potential.

You, too, can seek the divine light and energy that permeates the world and strive to become the person God knows you can become.

NOTES

1. Otis Moss III, a sermon for Lectionary Homiletics, May 20, 2021.
2. Rodger Nishioka, “Praying Matters,” August 22, 2021.
3. Greg Garrett and Sabrina Fountain, *The Courage to See*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019), p. 191.
4. Susan Sparks, “The Power of Prayer... at the Kmart,” Day1.org, July 24, 2013.