

Seeing Things God's Way

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You know that energy on the last day of school? The sort of palpable sense of excitement, tinged with a little nostalgia at saying goodbye, and maybe also marked with an especially acute awareness of how time is marching on...

Well it was in a moment like that, that I was asked a question that has really lingered with me.

It was the last day of my second year of seminary, and I was sitting with my cohort in the final session of Introduction to Preaching and Worship.

There were maybe about 15 minutes left in the class, and our professor Dr. Janet Walton, stood up, and said, I just have one more question for us to discuss: does prayer work?

This was her way. She had the rare skill to ask a pointed and compelling question and then the even rarer skill to hold hospitable silence for as long as it took for someone to raise their hand.

I didn't raise my hand. Some others spoke. I don't really remember what anyone said.

But the question has reverberated for me.

The gift of a good question is that you can fill it with your own wondering. For me, that question provokes an age-old question of faith.

Why are we telling God what God already knows?

What is the purpose of listing those who are sick in our prayers when we know that God is aware of their illness?

What is the point of naming the grief in our hearts to God if we believe God already knows our sorrow and pain?

What possible reason could there be to name off all the things we are grateful for, when God is the one who gave them to us in the first place?

And I find this a particularly pressing question for myself because, well, part of what I do at work everyday is pray for you.

And part of what I ask you to do each week is pray for each other.

So, its kind of an important question. Does prayer work?

I suspect it won't surprise you to hear that I believe the answer is yes.

But, that yes depends on what it means to us that prayer “works.”

One way to envision prayer is that we are lobbyists trying to convince God to see things our way. That the purpose of prayer is to persuade God to do something God would not have otherwise done, or get God onto our side about something. I do not think prayer works like that.

This is why most Super Bowl Sundays I begin the prayers of the people by asking for any “non-football related” prayers. Because I do not think that—for example—the outcome of a sporting event is decided by who’s fans prayers more, or prayed better.

Or—on a more serious note—I do not think that God choses to spare some people of illness or disaster because they had people praying for them, while allowing others un-prayed-for to succumb.

To me, that is too small an image of God.

I do not think prayer works as a way to get God to see things our way.

However. I do think that prayer works as a way for *us* to start to see things *God’s way*.

In this mornings reading, the prophet Isaiah reminds us that prayer is as much about our listening to God as it is speaking to God.

And God reminds Isaiah that the perspective God has over creation is vaster than we can understand or imagine:

Incline your ear and listen...

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Which is to say that we are best served if we approach prayer not as an opportunity to put our thoughts into God’s mind, but rather as a opportunity to have God’s thoughts put into our minds.

Not getting God to see things our way.

But, a chance for us to start to see things God’s way.

One way to understand this is to think about how our brains works. Our brains are vest networks of neurons that can wire together in complex pathways.

A neuropsychologist named Donald Hebb coined a very helpful phrase to remember. “Neurons that fire together, wire together.” That is, the more that we think, or act in a certain way, the more fixed that way of thinking or acting becomes in our mind.

In the negative, this is the mechanism of addiction. The more we come to associate a feeling of pleasure with a particular substance, the more of our mental energy becomes directed toward seeking that substance.

In the positive, this is how we learn skills. Repeated practice, of a baseball swing, or a scale on the piano, means that overtime, what once took careful attention and effort, becomes second nature.

The regular practice of prayer is a habit that can transform how we experience the world.

Prayer becomes a way of wiring our own souls to perceive God’s activity in the world more readily, to remember God’s love and care for us, and for others more effortlessly, it makes our hearts more ready to forgive.

When we lift up the name of one who is sick, or dying, or grieving, we are joining God in extending love and compassion to that person. And in doing so we are also reinforcing in our own spirits the truth of God’s care for that person.

But the real miracle of prayer is not just how it transforms our own hearts and minds, but I believe that prayer has the power to heal what is disconnected and broken among us.

Because when we pray for others, we are reminding our hearts that God’s care is not just for our own concerns, but for the greater good.

And I am convinced that if we all spent serious time and energy praying for our enemies with love in our hearts, I think we would live in a less violent world.

I think that if we all genuinely repeated each day that what we really hoped for was God’s will to be done, not our own, the world would not be as subject to the destructiveness of narrow self-interest.

I believe that the regular practice of prayer among us would begin to change the world, and bend us collectively toward a more just a loving existence, not because we convinced God that this is what God should do.

But because in prayer God will have tuned our hearts to see the world the way God sees it, and respond to it with the love God has for all creation.