

WHAT DO I PRAY FOR?

The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Virginia Beach VA 23452
www.aidanvba.net
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Last week I spoke about who is in charge and encouraged us to all realize that God is the one in charge, driving the bus in my analogy. I suggested that when we pray we not hand God a list of our demands or treat God as a holy wishing well. This week we continue with the story of Samuel and the Kings of Israel and it seems that Samuel and the people still have not got the message.

In today's reading, Samuel is tasked by God with finding the replacement for Saul who has been a great disappointment to Samuel as King of Israel. In fact our passage states that God was sorry he made him king. However that is not the end of the story. God moves forward with what God's people need again even when they do not realize this themselves. Samuel is truly upset, but God says, get over it and let's move on.

So Samuel is sent to the family of Jesse to select the new king. He doesn't know which of Jesse's sons this will be, but God tells him to create the pretext of a sacrifice to get all the boys in front of him. Samuel looks at the first son and thinks wow this guy must be it. God however says no, this is not the one that you are to select. Each of Jesse's sons come before him yet none is the right person. God tells Samuel that God does not see as humans see. This is important for us to all take a moment to absorb. How often do we judge people by our human eyes, our standards, and not try to see people more like God does or for that matter the Jesus saw them. A standard theme of the Hebrew Scriptures is that it is often the least expected who is the one that turns into the leader. This is also true of Jesus. So our first lesson of the day is to try to see others through the eyes of God.

It isn't until Samuel asks to see the youngest son who is out tending the fields that we find our new king. This young shepherd is David and is the one that God tells Samuel will be king. I do not want to pass by the last little bit where the power of the Lord comes upon David. Once again the last, the least, the unexpected is the chosen one, but God does not pat him on the head and send him on his way, but empowers David to become a great king. Flaws and all David is the greatest king from the historical period.

All through this, Samuel is engaged in prayer with God and is truly asking for guidance. Of course what is really interesting is the number of times Samuel jumps to a conclusion only to be corrected by God. However the important point is that he keeps in conversation and works to discern what it is that God wants him to do.

This brings me around to want to fill in a little more on this idea of prayer especially the prayers that we say the most often, which are prayers of intercession and petition. Prayers of intercession is what most of our prayers of the people are made up of. These

are prayers on behalf of others. Listen today as we read these prayers. Also really take the time to comprehend what we ask for when we say these prayers.

The Society of St. John the Evangelist in this period before General Convention is asking people to send in prayers for convention. Notice today we are adding a prayer for General convention and for the candidates for Presiding Bishop. Also take a moment to notice what I put in those prayers. At the same time SSJE is running a series that they did a couple years ago about learning to pray. I read a sermon by Br. Geoffrey about intercessory prayer and how to go about this particular type of prayer.

He points out that the New Testament Greek word, 'entunchanein', which means 'to make intercession,' literally translated does not mean, making petitions, or saying any words at all. 'Entunchanein', to make intercession, literally means 'to be with someone on behalf of another.'¹

Now stop for a moment and think about that idea. Imagine when you pray for someone that you are actually with them. That is exactly what Br. Geoffrey suggests and I have found this very helpful. Imagine the person is in front of you or you are with them. Imagine them being held by Jesus in their suffering. Then speak your prayer directly to Jesus or God whatever works for you with this image.

I have been doing this in particular with Wendy's mom Emily. Many of you may be aware that we expect her to die at any moment. Please note I did use the word die, not pass away or anything else. I find it helpful to name what is happening and not sugar coat it, but this does raise the question of what should we pray for. Emily's body is shutting down. Someone said I will pray for her recovery. I said, please don't do that. She is trapped in a body that is beyond repair. In her case healing and recovery have nothing to do with each other. Often when we pray for healing we are praying for recovery but sometimes that simply is not the case. So as I pray for Emily I imagine her being held by Jesus or I see him reaching out to her to welcome her to her rest.

I have more than once had a spouse or a family member ask me, "Is it ok for me to pray that they die." For all of us especially with a long illness the answer is yes it is ok. Sometimes death is the only healing possible. In fact Agnes Sanford famously said that "death is the ultimate healing."

Now I have traveled a long way from Samuel, Saul and David but as I have wandered you through these thoughts I have touched on the critical question of intercessory prayer and prayers of petition as well. What we pray for is so very important. Now we are not going to change God's mind about much of anything by our prayers, but what we can do is discern where God is in any crisis. More importantly we can discern what God is calling us to do. Samuel was wise enough to continue listening rather than making up his own mind in finding the future King David. We must also continue to listen for those messages that God sends in the many forms that God sends them. I end

¹ <http://ssje.org/ssje/2009/10/20/intercession-br-geoffrey-tristram/>

again with the reminder that prayer is a two way conversation and in any good conversation we need to be a listener first. AMEN