



90 North Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107
Tel: (860) 521-9460 Fax: (860) 521 1855

Senior Minister: Rev. Thomas G. Carr
Associate Minister: Amy Hollis
Choral Director: Mindy Shilansky
Accompainst: Mr. Bruce M. Hector

Change the World By Changing Me

Matthew 7: 7-11

Luke 12: 49-56

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Thomas Merton, who may be the most profound spiritual writer of the 20th century, once wrote, “The *desire* to pray is the deepest prayer.”

Prayer is something that, I have come to believe is innate in every human being, and perhaps, in every living being. Something within us pulls us towards our Source, to the numinous qualities of Life, to the most Profound – to God. Not all people consciously recognize this; some even consciously attempt to thwart it, but because we are from life and of life and an integral part of all life, (and hence, not immune to the gravitational laws of life), then we must be pulled towards Life itself, the One I know as God.

There are so many ways we pray – with words and without, in our heads and through the heart, in song and dance and, maybe the deepest way, in silence. Today, I want to focus on just one of these types of prayer, one commonly called the prayer of petition. By petitionary prayer, I mean prayer in which we “make our requests known” to God, as scripture says; we ask God for something.

What those requests may be vary widely, of course, ranging from very private ones to get out of some kind of fix, to prayers for reconciliation with an enemy or loved one or for world peace. This type of prayer follows the teaching of Jesus who, in the reading from Matthew’s Gospel, directs us to “Ask, seek, knock.... God, who is so much wiser and benevolent and compassionate than we are, will give what is good and full of abundant life.” Keep praying, is Jesus’ constant refrain. Keep seeking. Keep knocking. Keep after it. Keep that deep desire open in your soul and whether or not you get what you ask for, you will receive the greatest of all gifts: you become conscious of the Presence of God.

Now, I could spend the rest of this sermon and about 10 more, talking about how prayer “works” and how it doesn’t, why some prayers are answered and why some don’t seem to be – but I’m not going to do that. What I want to look at is a very specific prayer. First, listen to this story:

A holy man said this about himself:

“I was a revolutionary when I was young and all my prayer to God was ‘Lord, give me the energy to change the world.’

“As I approached middle age and realized that half my life was gone without my changing a single soul, I changed my prayer to ‘Lord, give me the grace to change all those who come into contact with me. Just my family and friends, and I shall be satisfied.’

“Now that I am an old man and my days are numbered, my one prayer is, ‘Lord, give me the grace to change myself.’ If I had prayed for this right from the start I should not have wasted my life.”

That, in my opinion, is a prayer. And so is the lyrics to Yahweh, a song by the Irish rock group U2. The words are in the bulletin insert and later, I’ll play for you a little video piece Jason Apicella and I put together based on the song. (Actually, Jason did most of the work; I’m the idea guy! I’m grateful to him both for his expertise in things like this and his spirit of cooperation and mutual ministry.) U2 has been around for about 25 years and they write and perform music with a message. Lead singer Bono is, perhaps, the world’s most public advocate for the elimination of poverty, hunger and AIDS in Africa, a Christian who lives the message of Jesus and the prophets. The song is a prayer that calls upon Yahweh, an ancient Hebrew name for God, to do something – to change my life.

And that, in my estimation, is the deepest and most profound prayer of petition: the desire to be transformed.

“It’s me, It’s me, It’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.”

I say that for several reasons, and one of them is because we know we live in a seamless universe where everything and everyone is connected, and so, if one form of life or one being is changed, then everything is changed. And so, the amazing thing is, when we ask God to change us, we are asking to become instrumental agents of world transformation. We touch everything in life and everything touches us; if we are changed for the good, if we are transformed to be in harmony with the purposes of God, everything has that possibility, too.

“Take these hands,”

lead vocalist Bono sings,

“Teach them what to carry.

Take these hands,

Don’t make a fist.”

You know as well as I do and as much as we may doubt it, peace doesn't begin at a negotiating table in Geneva. That's a very good thing to do, but peace begins at a dinner table, when hands and hearts are opened and people are afforded dignity and are honored and listened to and tears are dried. It begins with hands that embrace the hurting and the hungry, hands that carry the burdens of those who can't carry their own. The restoration of the planet doesn't begin at Kyoto or Rio or Washington, DC or a power point by Al Gore, though all of those things are essential. It begins when our hands are filled with the soils and grasses and flowers of Earth and we fall in love once again with our home.

“Take these hands;
Teach them what to carry.”

Change the world by changing me.

But note the wisdom of U2.

“Yahweh, Yahweh,”

they sing

“Always pain before a child is born.”

A prayer like this – change me, God! – beckons us to enter into the pain. I say this because what we're asking God to do is dig down deep and transform us, to re-arrange our priorities and wills to become who we've been created to be. To use very different terminology, what we are calling on God to do is to hasten the cataclysm.

Let me explain. One of the elemental powers of life that science has discovered, is what some are calling “cataclysm.” By that, I mean that always, the universe is destroying some of its achievements. Some of creation is always in the process of coming to an end. And that, I needn't remind anyone, is always painful, and we experience this deeply because we are part of the universe: things die; landscapes are destroyed by wind or earthquake or fire; islands are buried by oceans; species are being destroyed; forests eliminated; people die; institutions die; Civilizations collapse – every human civilization has, you know - churches die; relationships die. And that's hard, painful – very painful. It's why denial is the most common cultural reaction to this, and why Disney World and ultra luxury resorts top the list of vacation destinations – there's no messiness and destruction there. It's why 40% of Americans don't believe global warming is happening or at least don't think it is causing any real problems. It's why some people will not stay with dying loved ones, in the end. It's just too painful to bear. Who really relishes the work of consciously recognizing our own mortality or the death of a relationship or the dying of a civilization?

It's tough stuff and it's also why I've never used the Gospel reading from Luke in my almost 25 years of preaching: “I came to bring fire to the earth,” says Jesus, “and

how I wish it were already kindled! . . . Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather, division!” And then it gets personal,

“they will be divided:

father against son

and son against father,

mother against daughter

and daughter against mother,”

Painful stuff – brokenness, division, cataclysm. But hear this: it is necessary, absolutely necessary to embrace the brokenness and pain. Why? And why is this an integral part of the universe? Because only in this way can something new to be born.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the soil

and dies, it remains just a single grain;

but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

so said Jesus in John’s Gospel (12: 24).

“Always pain before the child is born.”

If everything were always and forever growing and flowering, if nothing ever came to an end, nothing new could ever come to life. Always in the cataclysm, always in the pain, there is the seed and the soil of something creative, new, wonderful and life-giving to be born. We don’t necessarily know what that may be, but, like an unborn child, it is there; it is there.

“still waiting for the dawn.”

What is waiting to be born in you? What cataclysm are you experiencing or have you been through? Certainly, our civilization is going through one right now on so many levels. But at the very same moment, this question needs to spark us into deep reflection: what is that new thing God is working on in you, or through groups of people trying to live the prayer of transformation so that the world might be transformed? What is God bringing to birth in you, making brand new, in you?

“Still waiting for the dawn.

The sun is coming up

The sun is coming up on the ocean

This love is like a drop in the ocean

This love is like a drop in the ocean.”

Ah, this love! You'll notice in the video the drops of water falling into a pool and if you look carefully, you'll see the ripples moving outward and soon, the whole pool is affected. Here is the answer to the prayer: the love of God, in the midst of these dark, painful moments, will somehow, in some amazing and creative way, ripple from inside you to everyone and everyplace, to every living being, to bring healing and peace. That's the "new thing," as Isaiah sings, that God is doing – always.

One more thing: prayers of petition for personal transformation can never stay personal. Always, always, the deepest prayers are to change the world.

"Take this city,"

sings Bono

"A city should be shining on a hill

Take this city

If it be your will.

What no man can own, no man can take.

Take this heart

And let it break."

"A city on a hill," an obvious reference to Governor John Winthrop's statement in about 1630 concerning the North American continent he and his fellow Europeans landed upon. "For we must consider," he said, "that we shall be as a City upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. . . ." Quoted by Presidents and preachers for hundreds of years, this phrase gave the impetus to so many of the things we have done in our land – some good and some incredibly abusive and destructive. But you will notice U2's prayer, that it isn't like many of the prayers and songs for God to bless America or to stand beside her and protect her because this prayer stands in the long biblical, prophetic tradition which cries out for radical transformation of culture from an extracting, greedy one into a community that serves the world and takes responsibility to be a light to the world. It's a prayer that calls us to "rend our hearts" – "make it break" - and remember that the land is not ours, that we don't "own" life, to turn away from the blind, addictive pursuit of whatever we can pull out of Earth while ignoring the cries of people everywhere.

"Take this heart

Take this heart

Take this heart

And make it break."

O, God! May you take these hearts of stone and make them hearts of flesh, to serve you and the world you so love, so that we might worship you in Spirit and in Truth.

Enjoy U2.

Yahweh

Take these shoes
Click clacking down some dead end street
Take these shoes
And make them fit
Take this shirt
Polyester white trash made in nowhere
Take this shirt
And make it clean, clean
Take this soul
Stranded in some skin and bones
Take this soul
And make it sing

Yahweh, Yahweh
Always pain before a child is born
Yahweh, Yahweh
Still I'm waiting for the dawn

Take these hands
Teach them what to carry
Take these hands
Don't make a fist no
Take this mouth
So quick to criticise
Take this mouth
Give it a kiss

Yahweh, Yahweh
Always pain before a child is born
Yahweh, Yahweh
Still I'm waiting for the dawn

Still waiting for the dawn, the sun is coming up
The sun is coming up on the ocean
This love is like a drop in the ocean
This love is like a drop in the ocean

Yahweh, Yahweh
Always pain before a child is born
Yahweh, tell me now
Why the dark before the dawn?

Take this city
A city should be shining on a hill
Take this city
If it be your will
What no man can own, no man can take
Take this heart
Take this heart
Take this heart
And let it break