

Praying for Mister Rogers

William Stell

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Second reading: James 5:13-15 — Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

This morning, we're wrapping up our 3-week sermon series on prayer. Last week, we talked about praying with the Book of Psalms, and I suggested some chapters that you can use to pray. We talked about how you can bring your saddest, angriest, most desperate self to God in prayer, because that's what the people who wrote the book of Psalms did. This week, I've got a big-picture question for us to tackle: Do our prayers matter? Can they actually affect what happens in our world?

When you pray to God for something, is it like asking your boss for something? You make a polite request, and God says, "Okay, lemme think about that, and I'll get back to you." And does God ever change God's plans because of what we pray? Does God ever say, in response to a prayer, "Well, I wasn't planning on that, but since you asked so nicely, yes, I'll go ahead and do that for you"? Generally, we don't think of God quite like that. On the contrary, many people think of God as possessing an immutable master plan for each person's life and for our world. Sometimes what we want aligns with it, and sometimes what we want doesn't align with it, but either way, the divine plan won't change simply because we prayed for what we want.

And yet, we want to believe that our prayers can make a difference, that they matter for our lives and for our world. Our second reading this morning, from the Letter of James, seems to suggest that they do. "If you're suffering, pray. If you're sick, have the elders pray. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up."

Now, those are encouraging words, but they can also be dangerous words. To say that "the prayer of faith will save the sick" — without any nuance or qualification — seems like a cruel set-up for disappointment. How many of us have prayed for a loved one who was sick to be healed, but then watched that loved one just continue to digress? Or perhaps you prayed for your marriage or another relationship to work out, but then it all came crumbling down on your head. Or perhaps you prayed for your child to find their way back to God, or even just back to stability, but they seem to be as lost now as they have ever been. We want to believe that our prayers make a difference, but sometimes the weight of evidence seems to point in the opposite direction.

This morning, I want to suggest that our prayers do matter, but not always in the ways we expect. Our second reading talks about prayer saving us and raising us up, and I want to suggest that this

happens in a variety of ways. A few years ago, I read a story about Mister Rogers and one of his most ardent fans: a 14-year-old boy who lived in California and who was born with a severe form of cerebral palsy. As many of you know, cerebral palsy is a disorder in the brain that doesn't affect cognitive functioning but that inhibits bodily movement, often including speech. As a young child, this boy was abused by his caretakers, who led him to believe that he was to blame for his condition. Abuse leaves scars, both visible and invisible. According to the journalist who wrote this story, the boy in his teenage years "would get so mad at himself that he would hit himself, hard, with his own fists." On numerous occasions, he told "his mother, on the computer he used for a mouth, that he didn't want to live anymore, for he was sure that God didn't like what was inside him any more than he did."

Despite all of this, the boy was a lifelong fan of Mister Rogers, and even as a 14-year-old he watched the TV show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* anytime it was on. In fact, the boy's mother believed that "it was Mister Rogers who was keeping her son alive." Wouldn't it be wonderful if the two of them could meet, she thought. Mister Rogers lived on the other side of the country, in Pittsburgh, and it seemed impossible for her son to travel that distance. But as a loving, dedicated mother of a child with a disability, this woman was no stranger to the impossible. She did some research and got connected to a special foundation that made the arrangements: Mister Rogers would come to California, and he was going to meet her son in their home.

Unfortunately, the visit got off to a rocky start. The boy was very nervous to have Mister Rogers right there in the room with him. His nervousness morphed into anger, and the scars of abuse opened up again: the boy began to hit himself, and his mother had to take him out of the room to calm him down. During this time, Mister Rogers just waited patiently. When the boy returned, Mister Rogers looked at him and said, "I would like you to do something for me. Would you do something for me?" Through his computer, the boy answered yes, absolutely, he'd do anything for Mister Rogers. And then, this Presbyterian pastor turned children's TV star said to this boy, "I would like you to pray for me. Will you pray for me?"

The boy didn't know what to say. No one had asked him for something like this, ever. The boy had always been prayed *for*, had always been the *object* of prayer, but now someone was asking him to be an *agent* of prayer, to pray on behalf of his hero. "I'll try," the boy said. When the journalist who told this story followed up with the boy's mother down the road, she said that "he keeps Mister Rogers in his prayers and doesn't talk about wanting to die anymore, because he figures Mister Rogers is close to God, and if Mister Rogers likes him, that must mean that God likes him, too."

Now, after this encounter, the journalist complimented Mister Rogers "for being so smart—for knowing that asking the boy for his prayers would make the boy feel better about himself." And while that is of course what happened, the former pastor looked puzzled when the journalist gave him this compliment: "I didn't ask him for his prayers for him," Mister Rogers said. "I asked for me. I asked him because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted his intercession."

“The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up” — but not always in the ways we expect. Truth is, we can’t know all of the effects that any of our past prayers have had, and we can’t predict the precise difference that our future prayers will make. But we do know that our prayers make a difference *in us*. For one, the practice of praying reminds us that our thoughts and feelings, our desires and fears matter to God — and that truth is so easily forgotten. In addition, when we pray for people besides ourselves, prayer forges a connection between us and those we pray for. It frees us from constantly focusing on our own problems and helps us grow into a deeper, stronger love for others. And as we grow in this way, our sense of purpose grows as well — because love is why we are alive, friends.

There are many other gifts hidden in the practice of prayer that I could mention, but I’ll stop there, trusting that you’ll discover them on your own. As we conclude this series, let us re-commit ourselves to the practice of prayer — for ourselves, for our loved ones, for our enemies, and for our world. We don’t know all of the good that it will do, but we can trust that it will bear fruit in our own lives and beyond. “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.” Amen.