

“Does Prayer Change God?”

a sermon by

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Text: “...for your father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8b).

This past Monday the Gulf Coast of the United States suffered enormous devastation as Hurricane Katrina unleashed its fierce power on that part of our nation. For almost a week now we have wrestled with scenes that seem almost beyond belief: people evacuated from their homes; other people on rooftops crying desperately for food and water and yet the governmental agencies have seemed powerless to deliver the basic essentials to these people; the entire City of New Orleans flooded and evacuated, leaving us with great questions about whether the city will ever be fully rebuilt; looters and other criminals engaged in violence, rape, and robbery without any police deterrent. And in our own city we have experienced gas lines surrounding service stations with panic and the threat of chaos almost on every corner, as people struggle just to get gasoline for their cars.

One of the questions that haunts us right now is the question: why was the City of New Orleans and the government of the United States so unprepared? After all, even before September 11, 2001, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reported that the

three most potentially catastrophic disasters that were facing the United States were: a terrorist attack on New York City; a major earthquake in San Francisco and a hurricane strike on New Orleans. In September 2001 the Houston Chronicle wrote, "The New Orleans hurricane scenario may be the deadliest of all." It described a potential catastrophe very much like the one that is happening now.

I.

One of the questions that inevitably arises in situations like this is the question of the presence of God in such activities. Why does God allow such terrible things to happen in the world? This past week in our church a young mother, who was pregnant suddenly died of a brain tumor, leaving behind a grieving husband, child, and family. This week we face the aftermath of one of the most devastating storms ever to strike the United States. Why do these things happen? Where is God in the midst of all of this?

One of the most perplexing questions in this mix has to do with the question of whether God hears our prayer and whether our prayers make any real difference.

On the one hand the Bible affirms that God is unchangeable. In the Book of Malachi one finds these words: "I the Lord do not change"(Malachi 3:6). One of the great Fathers of the Church, Origen, once reflected on the paradox of praying to a God that does not change. "First," said Origen, "if God foreknows what will come to be and if it must happen, then prayer is in vain. Second," he said, "if everything happens according to God's will and if what He wills is fixed and not one of the things He wills can be changed, then prayer is in vain." Origen came down on the side of a changeless God, who knew and decreed all that happened.

But there is another dimension to the Bible that moves in a very different way. There is another portrait of God in the Bible that views God as a personal being who listens attentively to the prayers of his people and who responds to them. Jesus personified that portrait. In the prayer we call the Lord's Prayer, he lists the things that we should pray for:

Bread for strength and life;
Forgiveness from the sins that overwhelm us;
Deliverance from temptation and from the evil one.

In the same manner Jesus' disciples followed the example of Jesus. They prayed for physical healings, for liberation from prison, safety on journeys. The Apostle Paul interceded for his churches constantly and did not hesitate to make personal requests.

So, then, how do we hold together these two very different concepts of God?

II.

First of all, we affirm that God is the sovereign lord of all life. God is the creator of the world and all that is in it. This belief in the creative power of God is not separate from our belief

of God's presence in Jesus Christ. It is an outgrowth of it. It is our experience of God's grace in Jesus Christ that gives us a certain confidence in the world around us.

The Presbyterian or Reformed faith has always put a great deal of emphasis on this. The God with whom we have to do is the creator of heaven and earth that maintains all things in his being and governs all things by his will. Presbyterians have always understood God as energy, force, and life. God is the one who "comes with might, who measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span." This is the Creator God who works mightily in human hearts.

This vision of the majesty of God affects everything we do. This is the reason that in our worship there is an element of dignity and reserve. In worship we do not claim that God is our "pal" or "buddy." God is the creator of all that is. Therefore, we approach God with respect and humility.

This understanding of God as the creator of the universe is also coupled with an understanding that God is also the sustainer of the world around us. The Christian witness to the world today is that God's grace is the last word in every human situation, whether that situation is the death of a young mother or a natural disaster such as Hurricane Katrina. This grace is not a stoic attitude that allows us to face every difficult situation with resignation. It is rather the personal gracious attitude of God that opens up new possibilities and gives hope beyond every defeat.

St. Augustine, in his magnificent work *The City of God*, reflected on the great tragedy of the fall of Rome in the Fifth Century as the city was overrun with pagan barbarians of marauders and looters. One of the questions that plagued Augustine was the question as to why Christians suffered the same brutality and violence as none Christians. Augustine concluded that Christians are distinguished not by what happens to them but by the way they respond to what happens to them. For Augustine Christians differ not in what happens to them, but in the fact that they are able to respond in faith, hope, and love.

III.

Secondly, we affirm that God is personal. There is nothing more important to our faith than this affirmation. The God who created the world, who was fully present in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a God who is at work in your life and in mine.

The Bible is very clear on this point.

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7).

"If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer" (I John 3:22).

“And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16).

The Bible is very clear on this point. The God whom we worship and serve is not a remote God who is removed from the creation. He is a part of our everyday lives. He hears our prayers and responds to them. Karl Barth once observed that he saw no contradiction at all in a God who chooses to let prayers affect him. “He is not deaf,” writes Barth. “He listens; more than that, he acts. Prayer exerts an influence on God’s action, even upon his existence. The fact that God yields to our petitions, changing his intentions in response to our prayers, is not a sign of weakness. God himself has so willed it.”

One of the most puzzling questions for all of us concerns how we understand God’s will. It is particularly troubling in terms of some of the things that happen to people, including accidents, illnesses, and tragic deaths. William Sloan Coffin once preached a powerful sermon after the death of his son entitled “Alex’s Death.” His son Alex was killed while driving in a terrible storm in Boston when his car careened off the road and ended in Boston Harbor. In this sermon Coffin related an incident that happened on the day following his son’s death. On that day he was visited by a number of people from the congregation where he was serving as minister. That night a woman bringing food for the family visited the home where Coffin was staying. As this woman made her way to the kitchen, she looked over to this grieving father and said, shaking her head, “I just don’t understand the will of God.” Coffin later said that at that point something in him snapped. “I’ll say you don’t,” he said to the woman in anger. “Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had a couple of “frosties” too many? Do you think it was God’s will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road, and no guardrail separating the road and Boston harbor?”

Coffin went on to say that we need to get it through our heads that God does not go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fist around knives, and his hands on steering wheels. Coffin went on to say that “the one thing that should never be said when someone dies is ‘It is the will of God.’” Never do we know enough to say that.” Then he went on to say, that his own consolation was “in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.”

IV.

Thirdly, we need to be reminded that in the face of such a tragedy as we have witnessed over the past week we are called to respond to this terrible tragedy with faith, hope, and love. We should make every effort we can to bring relief to the people of the Gulf Coast that have been ravaged by this terrible storm and that have suffering so much. It is particularly tragic that so many of those who have suffered and died are poor people who did not have the wherewithal to leave their homes. In addition, we should pledge to ourselves that we will never allow ourselves to be caught so off guard and unprepared to deal quickly with this type of tragedy.

But in the face of such a tragedy we must not lose hope. We believe that God is at work even in the most difficult situations. After all, as the Apostle Paul put, “Who shall separate us from the love of God in Christ? Shall tribulation, distress, persecution, famine or sword? No, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

The poet Robert Browning Hamilton put it in a somewhat different way.

“I walked a mile with Pleasure,
She chattered all the way;
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.”

“I walked a mile with Sorrow
And ne'er a word said she;
But oh, the things I learned from her
When sorrow walked with me.”