

Series: Prayers from the Cross

Today: Why Have You Forsaken Me? Prayers When We Feel Abandoned

Text: Mark 15:33-34

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

It is not a requirement, but it is a strong suggestion for ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament that all candidates enroll in a ten week program of Clinical Pastoral Education, CPE is a program in a hospital setting to learn the dynamics of how to minister to people when they are in a crisis. I shall never forget the first weekend that I spent as the chaplain on call for the Emergency Room of Overlook Hospital in Summit, NJ.

I was all of 24 years old, and I had never experienced a significant death in my family. On Friday night of this weekend a 16 year old young man was brought into the hospital dead on arrival. He had been hit head on by a driver with a blood alcohol content well over the legal limit, and that driver had walked away from the accident without a scratch.

My job was to wait for the family to arrive and offer them pastoral care as they dealt with the overwhelming news of their son's death. To say that I was nervous would have been a gross understatement. I had never dealt with anything like this in my life, and I was petrified of saying the wrong thing.

I stood with the family as the doctor delivered the news of their son's death. I escorted them into the room where his body lay to allow them to say good bye. I put my hands on their shoulders as they heaved the deepest sobs I had ever heard, and at some point I asked them if they would like me to pray.

The boy's father looked at me with hatred in his eyes. *"Pray? Are you joking? Where was God when that man hit my son? Where is God now? Pray? Get out of here and leave us with our son!"*

How can we pray when we are so overwhelmed with grief that God feels more like the enemy than our friend? How do we pray when feel God has abandoned us? This is the question our prayer from the cross raises for us this morning, and I believe the prayer that Jesus prays gives us an answer; an answer which incorporates the honesty of our prayer, the use of scripture, and trust in the goodness of God.

The Honesty of Prayer

Let's start with the obvious. This is a prayer that we don't expect Jesus to pray. We might even wish he hadn't prayed it. How could this one, whom we call the Son of God, feel so distant from God that he would cry out, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

In Christian tradition we say that Jesus lived in perfect relationship with God, but something is happening in this moment which makes him feel separate and alone. So he cries out, almost like a child crying for his parents, *"Please, please! Don't leave me alone!"*

William Barclay comments on his words this way: *"It is suggested that in that moment the weight of the world's sin fell upon the heart and being of Jesus; that that moment was the moment when he who knew no sin was made sin for us (II Corinthians 5:21); and that the penalty which he bore for us was the inevitable separation from God which sin brings. No one can say that that is not true; but if it is, it is a mystery which we can only state and at which we can only wonder."*

In that moment on the cross, Jesus understood the agony we understand when we choose to deny the presence of God in our lives. He understood what it meant to feel distant from God

by the circumstances in which he found himself. He understood what it meant to be alone, and his cry of abandonment is our cry, too. *Where was God when my son was killed? Where was God when my wife died? Where was God when I was betrayed by a friend?*

At our mid week service this week we used a reflection by Chris Glazer on the writings of Henri Nouwen. In his book, Can You Drink the Cup?, Nouwen writes: “*Mostly we are willing to look back at our lives and say, ‘I am grateful for the good things which brought me to this place.’ But when we lift our cup to life, we must dare to say, ‘I am grateful for all that has happened to me and led me to this moment. When we are crushed like grapes, we cannot think of the wine we will become.’*” (Can you Drink the Cup? P. 74-75) *Trusting God does not make the crushing experiences of our lives less painful, just more hopeful.*

We know that Jesus felt the full weight of sin because he shares his sense of separation from God in this moment. The Resurrection may be only a few days away when he will be reunited with God forever, but for now God allows him to feel the distance so that God might know the depth of human feeling when we feel abandoned.

The Use of Scripture

This plea from the cross is the only thing which Mark reports that Jesus spoke while he hung there dying. Luke and John report Jesus having conversations with the thief and with his mother, Mary and his beloved disciple, John. Mark is much more into the drama of his death. He focuses on the mocking of the crowd, the gambling of the soldiers for his clothes, the self righteousness of the Jewish leaders, and the faith response of the centurion. The only words which Jesus spoke were these words in Hebrew: *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachani.*

At our Early Word Bible Study this week, Jack Houdeshel raised the question with us: Why Hebrew? Why were they not in Aramaic, the language he spoke, or Greek, the language of

the New Testament? The words are from Psalm 22. Perhaps Jesus spoke them like we might say, *“The Lord is my Shepherd.”* Perhaps he did not need to say the entire Psalm. Perhaps just a few words reminded him of its content, and those words would prove to be enough to see him through to the end.

The other day at my Clergy Consultation Group, the group asked me what had been some of the most meaningful ways we had received comfort during our most recent crisis with Cherie’s health. I had to be honest and say that it would be difficult to single out any one thing because everything that people have done to let us know that we were not alone in this journey has meant the world to us. We have received cards, flowers, meals, gift cards for takeout meals, and remembrances in prayer, and all of them have been extremely powerful reminders of how deeply we are cared for.

However, I told them that the thing that has meant the most to me has come as something of a surprise. I told them, *“This is probably something you wouldn’t expect to hear from me, but the messages of comfort that mean the most have been those when people find passages of scripture that we may or may not know and tell us how they are using it to pray for us.”*

We keep a website journal of what our experience on a website called *Caring Bridge*, and people have an opportunity to tell us they have visited and send us messages of encouragement. You can become part of that journal experience, if you like, by going to www.caringbridge.org, or call the church office and we can give you instructions as to how to register. The most meaningful messages in our guest book for me are when friends remind us of scripture passages.

My colleague and friend, Kent Kroehler, pastor of First United Methodist Church recently wrote, *“Joy and share delight/praise/thanks for the combination of three forces of treatment and recovery for you: good medicine, a positive attitude and the power of a praying*

community. A three-strand rope is strong!” The reference is to a passage in Ecclesiastes 4:12 which is often used in a wedding ceremony about the covenant between two human beings and God, and suddenly I had a new strength to draw on.

Tom Dodge, the Director of Spiritual Care for Hospice, recently wrote about his prayer from us in a quote from Isaiah: *Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.--Isa 43: 19.* Strength came to both of us believing that God was in the midst of a very difficult few months.

This is what can happen when we know scripture well enough to use it in our prayers. It helps to remind us that we are not the first to have experienced a rough patch in our lives, and that there are resources in their experiences from which we can draw strength.

Trust in the Goodness of God

So there are two ways to understand this prayer of abandonment by Jesus, and both are helpful. One way is to understand that God can identify with the human condition because he allowed Jesus to experience the weight of human sin and the separation it causes us to experience from God. The other way is to understand that when Jesus felt abandoned, he prayed the scriptures and found the strength to follow through to the end.

Perhaps it isn't an either or situation. Perhaps it is both. Perhaps Jesus really did experience what we from time to time experience ourselves; that life circumstances can make us feel separate from God. And perhaps when he felt separate, he prayed the scriptures as a way back to the connection for which he longed.

The first 18 verses of Psalm 22 bear a remarkable resemblance to the events which took place on Calvary. It is almost as if the Psalmist knew what would happen there. However, the Psalm changes its tone at verse 19 from pain and suffering to praise and thanksgiving. Is it

possible that Jesus spoke the opening lines of the Psalm to remember the outcome? *“For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me but heard me when I cried.”*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has always been one of my favorite theologians. He stood up against the evil of Adolf Hitler and for his witness he was put to death. However, before he was executed, he was a witness even from his prison cell.

The story is told of a day when he heard weeping from the next cell, and in an attempt to be helpful, Bonhoeffer identified himself as a pastor, assured the young man that he was not alone, and asked him if he would like to pray. The young man responded, *“I don’t believe in God.”* Bonhoeffer responded, *“If you can hear me, put your hands on the wall as if we were touching. Mine are here too.”* And then he began to pray:

*“Lord, it’s dark in me; in you is day.
I am alone, but you will stay.
I am afraid; you never cease.
I am at war; in you is peace.”*

A guard who observed this amazing interaction came to Bonhoeffer’s cell the next day. He said, *“I thought you might like to know that the boy in the next cell was very calm. He surprised everyone. He was executed this morning.”*

Conclusion

How do we pray when we feel abandoned? Jesus gave us a model on the cross. Be honest with God about your anguish. Search the scriptures to understand that you are not alone; that others have been anguished before you. Then trust God to transform your pain into something God can use to deepen your faith and make you of service to others.