

# “Living Water, Living Prayer “by Kate Cudlipp

**February 24, 2008**



When I signed up to preach for the third Sunday in Lent, I was impressed by the richness of the readings for this morning. So many possibilities for a preacher from the great stories, including the longest conversation Jesus had with an individual in the entire New Testament—and it was a conversation with a Samaritan woman, of all people!

I began reading for background, praying to be struck by a theme that resonated with the life we are living in this community, in this city, in the year 2008. Whether in answer to prayer or not (and we will be exploring that question in the rest of the sermon), I was instead struck by a bronchial infection that pretty much obliterated my sermon focus for much of this past week. As I fretted about how I could offer

anything of value from my diminished inner resources, I realized that I didn't have to be the source of insight—I could be a conduit for another's insights! In doing my earlier background preparation, I had come across an article from the Sojourners online sermon materials that had challenged me to wrestle with some of the deepest questions of faith.

So this morning, you will hear from Elaine Emeth, who at the time she wrote the piece for Sojourners, was a spiritual director, author, and student at Wesley Theological Seminary. I've left out some material and lightly edited in a few places, but I will be conveying her "riff" on prayer, sparked by the Hebrew Scripture and Gospel lessons for today.

## To the Limits of Our Faith

By Elaine V. Emeth

(adapted for this presentation—additions noted in brackets [ ])

The Israelites' demand for water in the Hebrew Scripture (Exodus 17:1-7) and Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well (John 4:5-26) suggest two different ways to pray for healing for ourselves and for the world.

In **cautious prayer**, we define the healing and put God to the test. In **courageous prayer** of faith, we allow God to define the healing and ourselves to be changed by our encounter with God. Usually our prayers for healing are not exclusively one or the other, but a combination of both, a back-and-forth between the two. It is easier to understand the difference if we look at them one at a time.

First, some observations on **cautious prayer**. Faith in God is never easy, but it sure is easier when everything is going well. When we thirst, like the Israelites wandering in the desert, we want to put God to the test. When we thirst for justice, for renewed strength, or for healing for ourselves or the world, we grumble among ourselves, like the Israelites, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Exodus 17:7). In our suffering and anguish, we want relief, we want things to be different, we want healing *according to our definition*. It is natural to pray, "Loving God, prove that you are with us, that you are our God, that you hear our cry and you care. Prove this by meeting our heart's desire.

Although it is an honest prayer, straight from the heart, this prayer is centered in our need to understand, to be in control, and to find relief—rather than being centered in God's will. [These honest prayers are beginnings, far better than praying falsely or not at all because] we are afraid to feel our true feelings. We may be afraid to pray truthfully whenever we find ourselves in anguish. Afraid to hope, lest we be disappointed; or worse, that our fragile faith might be threatened: "Blessed are they who never ask for anything, for they shall not be disappointed."

Can we risk being with doubtful, troublesome feelings long enough to pray out of that place, or is it too dangerous? Dare we be angry with God? Or acknowledge in our prayer how confused, or bereft, or abandoned we feel? How can we go on trying to be faithful if we actually acknowledge that sometimes we fear that God is not there? [So even cautious prayer is challenging and an important step to acknowledging rather than denying our confusion, our fears and our doubts, but it is not a place to stop.] These cautious prayers are more like a wish than a true prayer, because they are not

really open. A further step is to push the limits of personal faith with courageous prayer characterized by expecting the unexpected. We have to risk letting God be in charge and take a chance on being changed by our encounter with God.

Four guidelines may be offered for this open kind of prayer for healing: [Here I want to say that as I read the guidelines that follow, which ask for a complete trust in God, I realized these may be elements of a “framing story” for Christians that Peter talked about last week. The guidelines ask us to agree to a story about who God is and how God works in our lives. As I looked at these elements of a framing story, I knew that I was being called to a deeper faith than I am currently able to claim. I was reminded of what the Moravian pastor said to John Wesley when Wesley doubted his own faith: “Preach until you have faith and then preach because you have faith.” Or as the man said to Jesus, “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.”

Now, here are the four guidelines to courageous prayer:

1. Trust your heart to lead you to the heart of God.
2. Trust God to meet you in unexpected, “unacceptable” ways.
3. Trust that God’s will for us is good.
4. Trust that God is with us. [Let me elaborate.]

**1. Trust your heart to lead you to the heart of God.** What might be the prayer of a beloved child of God who is in pain? One authentic prayer—one I’ve never heard about in church—is the tantrum. Those who really let God hear about their pain,

grief, outrage, or fatigue often feel or hear a response in the quiet of their emptied hearts. This is not complaining at God, but pouring out our hearts fully, without editing our prayer so that it's "nice." The God of Job listens and responds, like the most loving parent who recognizes through a tantrum a child who needs to be held. In the final chapters of the book of Job we don't get explanations; we get held and loved, cradled and consoled. This is the basis of our hope: God is out there somewhere and is all-encompassing and in charge.

**Trust your heart to lead you to the heart of God.**

**2. Trust God to meet you in the unexpected person, the unacceptable situation, the rejected feeling, the prayer you are afraid to pray.** The story of the woman at the well tells us that Jesus comes to the Samaritan woman in us, the foreigner who is considered unclean, the outcast with whom we refuse to identify. He knows all about her, yet he seeks her out and asks her to give him a drink of water. He has no drinking vessel with him, so he is ready to drink from hers. How can this be? Who do we think are less worthy than ourselves in the world? Affluent people? Politicians, doctors, lawyers? Gays and lesbians? Conservatives, liberals? Obese people? Those who are mentally ill? If the living Christ comes to us through one of these, will we be open to his presence, or will he go unrecognized?

What do we reject within ourselves? Selfishness? Anger? Judgmentalism? Our "wayward" sexual desire? Our aggressive instincts? What if Jesus meets us at our broken, growing edges, but we're afraid to meet him there?

What situations are unacceptable by our rules for God? When children die? When a young mother or father has cancer?

Accidents, disability, disease? When someone is a victim of crime? The infinite, true God cannot be our God unless we give up the job. If I expect God to act according to my rules, then I am trying to reverse the right order. Right relationship is foundational to authentic spirituality.

**Trust God to meet you in unexpected, "unacceptable" ways.**

**3. Trust that God's will for us is good, far beyond our comprehension, or even our imagination.** When we pray for healing, rather than focusing on relief or a cure, we have to let God define the healing, trusting that God cares about the whole person, [the whole of creation.]

The story of the woman at the well is illuminating. She is preoccupied with the physical need for water and the work of drawing water from the communal well each day. Jesus says to her and to us, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is saying to you 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." Living water? What is that? The Samaritan woman and Jesus are talking on different "wavelengths." He understands her, but she does not grasp this concept of living water. Like her, we take our need for healing to Jesus, and answers come that we cannot hear or understand.

When we pray for healing for ourselves or a loved one, [or a troubled place in the world,] this spring of living water flows in us and grows in those for whom we pray if they are open to it at all. To pray—as opposed to wishing—to *pray* is to give God an opening. Like ordinary water, the living water of eternal life just needs an opening in order to flow. This "welling up to eternal life" that Jesus speaks of affects

bodies, minds, and spirits in a way that brings about greater health and wholeness.

But we have to participate. God's healing is not a passive event. It is not a matter of praying and then sitting back, waiting to receive. God's definition of healing makes very individual and specific demands. The inner spring of living water may demand costly changes in our lives. It may carry a price tag that requires giving up illusions, giving up helplessness, or giving up ambivalence.

Healing prayer cannot fail. Our definition of healing, like the Samaritan woman's understanding of water, is simply too small. If our definitions and limitations and controls are not blown away, there is no room for healing. The Israelites thirsting in the desert received water flowing from a rock. We have to be open to the unexpected.

**Trust that God's will for us is good.**

**4. Trust that God is with us.** Jesus opened his arms wide enough on the cross to embrace all of our suffering, regardless of its source and its effects—the suffering we create out of being unable to be completely faithful, the persecution and difficulties that result from faithfulness, and the suffering that is simply part of the human condition—all of it. He took it into his very being. He is crucified whenever we are. How "with us" can God be? God drinks from our cup, whether it contains sweetness and joy or bitter tears.

Is the Lord among us or not? God is with us, but God's living water respects the spiritual dams that we build. When we thirst for healing, are we willing to open the floodgates through direct and honest prayer, not knowing God's definition of healing in a particular situation and what it will require of us? Or would we rather stand safely on dry land and pray cautiously for rain?