

“My Dilemma with Prayer” by Michele Frome

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Third Sunday after Epiphany

The story of Mary and Jesus at the wedding in Cana is familiar, but when I read it to prepare for this sermon, I discovered some details I didn't remember. We're at a wedding party, and the host has run out of wine. Mary goes to Jesus and tells him this. So far, so good.

But then comes my first surprise: Jesus says, "it's none of my business." None of my business?!? Wow! Jesus doesn't say, "OK, you've got a problem, I'll solve it for you." Instead, he says, that's not my problem!

Then my second surprise: Mary instructs the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them, and then she walks away. Get this: Mary tells Jesus there's a problem, Jesus says "it's not my problem," then Mary walks away, not saying another word to Jesus, but telling the servants "Do whatever he tells you." Rather trusting, wouldn't you say? What if he tells them to go home...or to dance naked on the tables, in order to distract the guests from the fact that there's no more wine?

At first, this reminds me of a parent telling their teenage child to do their homework, and the teenager saying, "I don't have any homework;" then, the parent simply walks away, leaving the teenager in their room to settle down and, eventually, do the homework that they claim they don't have.

Upon reflection, however, I think Mary has something to teach me about prayer. She tells the Son of God what the problem is – the wedding host is about to run out of wine – but she doesn't tell him what to do. She doesn't suggest he turn water into wine, or send the servants to the market to buy more wine. She just tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says. ■

My Dilemma

This leads me to the issue I've been grappling with since last spring. Most of you know that I am participating in Clinical Pastoral Education – in other words, “training to be a chaplain.” Many of you know that I have received financial support for this training from the Seekers Church Growing Edge Fund, for which I am very grateful.

I completed my first unit of training at Frederick County Hospice. One of my classmates there was a Baptist minister. When he shared his write-ups of his visits with patients, I noted that he always prayed for what the patient wanted. When an elderly woman complained “I don't like being dependent on my daughter for everything” or an elderly man yearned to be able to walk again, my colleague would pray, “God, please help Mary to regain her independence” or “please help Dick to walk again.”

At the time, I thought that was wrong. We shouldn't feed their false hope that they'll regain their independence or their ability to walk, I thought – we should help them to gain serenity by accepting their own aging and diminishment – in other words, accepting the things they cannot change.

Step Eleven

Why acceptance?

As most of you know, the structure for my spiritual practice is the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon. I started working a twelve-step program 35 years ago. Although a regular church-goer, in my late 20s and early 30s I was still a child spirituality – I prayed to God the way a child writes to Santa Claus. Through working the twelve steps, I am growing into a mature spiritual adult.

I learned how to pray as an adult from Step Eleven. Step Eleven says, “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, asking only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry it out.” Let me repeat that second part: “asking only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry it out.”

Learning to say this prayer was a real turning point in my spiritual growing up. Thirty-five years ago, I was trapped in an inner world of depression and

loneliness. It sounds silly now, but at the time I believed that the goal of my life was to succeed at everything I did and to get everything I wanted. And I wasn't – I wasn't succeeding & I wasn't getting what I wanted! My image of myself and my reality were in conflict – so I was in depression.

But the twelve steps invited me to let go of that image. The third step invited me to turn my will and my life over to God. That didn't mean that God would then give me what I wanted – it meant that gradually, over time, I would want what God gives me. There's a line in the Third Step Prayer that still speaks powerfully to me: "Relieve me of the bondage of self." The bondage of self. I realized that the focus on myself and what I want, my image of who I expected myself to be – that was the bondage that could keep me depressed and alone.

Being relieved of this bondage, I became free. So you see, praying for God's will instead of praying for what I wanted has been a really important part of my spiritual journey.

A Recent Prayer Experience

Back to my clinical pastoral training: After completing my training in Frederick, I started my second unit of training in September at the Hebrew Nursing Home in Rockville, where I will be studying and serving until May.

In my first week, something odd happened: I offered prayers for two patients, making a specific prayer request in response to their concerns. A few days later, I learned that both of these requests were fulfilled!

Wow, I thought, my prayers actually worked! Maybe I've been given a new and powerful gift here!

I shared this with my step-mother, who is a retired minister. She promptly put me in my place with this response: "Just because you turned the tap and water came out, it doesn't mean that you invented water."

OK, so I didn't invent water – but what's really going on here?

Caregiving in the Jewish Tradition

In my training, I'm learning that when we are sick, disabled or dying, we become acutely aware of being alone and powerless. Our disability forces us off the merry-

go-round of life, and makes us face the reality our existence and mortality. (This can be terrifying; that's probably why we able-bodied people choose to stay busy, so we don't have any time to confront this.)

Being at a Jewish institution, I'm learning a few things about Jewish tradition. From a book about Caregiving in the Jewish Tradition by Yisrael Kestenbaum, I've learned about the concept of Shekhinah – the form of God that dwells among us (similar, in some ways, to the "Holy Spirit").

Jewish writings tell us that the Shekhinah is present in the room when someone is ill, above the head of the sick one. But when we're sick, we rarely feel the presence of the Shekhinah.

Why not? Because we are so fully absorbed in our suffering. What we feel, most likely, is "My God, My God, why hath thou forsaken me?"

But the Shekhinah is there, because the Shekhinah is drawn to commune with those who feel alienated & alone. In other words, God is present when we are most hurting, but when we are most hurting we are most incapable of accessing God. So how do we re-connect with the Holy One when we are most suffering?

According to Kestenbaum, "We encounter the holy in our suffering through the presence of the Witness." Ah-hah – that's the role of the chaplain, to be a Witness to the reality of the sufferer.

An effective Witness feels the pain of the sufferer, but remains separate from them. From this position, the Witness feels God's presence and mirrors it back to the suffering one. The Witness is not the Holy One – the Witness is only the mirror that reflects the image of the Shekhinah above the bed into the face of the suffering one. As a chaplain, I'm just the intermediary – or, to use another analogy, I just turn the tap on the faucet.

For this to work, the Witness has to feel what the sufferer is feeling – as a Chaplain, I have to share their pain. To be an effective chaplain, I also need to be open and focused enough to sense the presence of God, and to reflect it.

By the way, family members can't do this, because they're too close – they, too, are sufferers.

According to Kestenbaum's book, Jewish teachings spell out three requirements to be

of service when visiting the sick:

First, the visitor must pray for the sick one. Second, this prayer must be at the bedside, where the Shekhinah is present. Third, the visitor needs to pray aloud for that which the sufferer yearns. Why? Two reasons:

- so the sufferer knows that the Witness really heard them and, more importantly,
- to help the sufferer reconnect with God and regain their own ability to pray.

Reconciling my Dilemma

So there I am, by the bedside or the wheelchair of a resident at the Hebrew Nursing Home, about to pray for them. How do I reconcile what I've learned from Kestenbaum's book with Step Eleven, which taught me to ask only for God's will?

I found my answer in a book by Henri Nouwen, entitled "With Open Hands." According to Nouwen, the important thing is not what I ask for, but my attitude in asking for it – whether I'm offering it as a prayer of little faith or a prayer of hope.

To quote Nouwen:

"If you pray like the man of little faith for health, success, ... peace or whatever else, then you get so set on the concrete request that you feel left in the cold when the expected present doesn't arrive...it is the concreteness of the wishes which eliminates the possibility for hope." In trying to arrange the future, the person of little faith closes themselves off from what might be coming.

In contrast is the prayer of hope. A mother hopes her child will come home safely. A nursing home resident hopes she'll regain the ability to walk. But in the Prayer of Hope, our focus is not on the gift, but on the one who gives it...the one we trust with our sufferings and our yearnings.

My Experience with the Jewish Prayer Service

This gave me a new "ah-hah" about my work at the Hebrew Home. Every day of the week, morning and afternoon prayer services are held in the small synagogue there. Sometimes, I help out by transporting residents in wheelchairs to and from the synagogue. When I do, I usually stay and participate in the service. I've noticed

that, on the days I participate in the prayer service, I feel I do a better job in my chaplain work.

When I say I “participate” in the service, I use the word “participate” loosely: the service is almost entirely in Hebrew, and I don’t know Hebrew. But I sit there. Sometimes, I just close my eyes and let the Hebrew words and chants wash over me. Other times, I attempt to follow along by reading the English translation on the opposite page in the prayer book – thankfully, the rabbi announces what page we’re on in English. It seems to me that there’s not a lot of personal confession and personal petition in this prayer book – it’s almost all praise and thanksgiving to God.

So here’s the ah-hah: the Jewish prayer service re-focuses me on God, the giver. It’s that simple.

Conclusion

Where does this leave me, with my 12-step tradition, my Christian tradition, and my Jewish insights? As a Chaplain, I need to feel the sufferer’s yearnings, and to verbalize them in prayer. In order to do this, I’ve decided to shift my approach to prayer a little, based on the model of Mary at the Wedding in Cana. When I offer my prayers of petition,

– I want to tell God what the problem is,

– I want to offer up my hopes, and then

– I want to trust God with the outcome.

In the end, I’ll strive to follow what Mary said to the servants about Jesus: “do whatever he tells you to do.” Amen.