

Honest to God?

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Luke 15:1-10

Exodus 32:7-14

In elementary school once a week after school I went to Good News Club. One of the lessons I remember was about prayer. The teacher told us that God always answers our prayers with one of three responses — “yes,” “no” or “wait.”

It was a few years yet 'til I was cynical enough to feel like that was a real cop out. It gives us a handy excuse for unanswered prayer. In fact, I've heard all too many times when a prayer goes unanswered, “It just wasn't God's will.” However, when prayers were answered, I heard that God moved in response to the prayer. That has become a real head-scratcher for me.

If unanswered prayers aren't God's will, then answered prayers must be God's will. So apparently, God will do whatever God wills. And that makes sense. But if that's the case, then why pray at all? Do our prayers matter to God?

This morning's scriptures paint very different pictures of human will and God's action. The parables fit pretty well with my understanding of how God works. I'm comfortable with the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The sheep has wandered, and God the shepherd saves it. The coin is lost, and God the widow finds it. God's action is an exercise of pure grace, merited only by the intrinsic value of what was lost. The coin did not deserve to be found, except that it held worth to the widow. There was no act of will on the part of the sheep, and God moved.

Those two stories can't really be understood outside of the context of the following story — the one we call “the prodigal son.” None of these three stories are really about what is lost — they are about the one doing the searching. The shepherd, the widow, the father. In fact, I've heard the third story referred to as “the prodigal

father” — the word “prodigal” means extravagant and wasteful, which is an appropriate description of the father upon the lost son’s return.

Of course, the coin and the sheep didn’t decide to get lost. Sheep are, frankly, too stupid to make such a decision. Coins lack any sort of will altogether. But the son? He ran off of his own accord. He wasted a fortune. He longed to eat pig slop. Listeners would understand him as “unrighteous.” They might have softened a bit when the son made the decision to come home. The son exercised his will to return to the father — all is well. But here is where the father does something surprising — the father runs to meet the son. He embraces the son. This is all before the son confesses and begs forgiveness. Even here, the story is *not* about the son’s will to return. As with the coin and the sheep, the parable is about the unconditional love of the father, and his actions in restoring the son.

So if God’s actions don’t depend at all on our will, what are we to do with stories like what we read in Exodus? I admit, I’m not a big fan of this portrait of God. God is ready to respond to Israel’s disobedience with divine wrath — and God, being divine, has every right to do so. But strangely enough, Moses manages to change God’s mind.

As a Mennonite, I have some trouble with that. We learn submission to God’s will from an early age. We aren’t to question God’s intent. We pray with Jesus, “not my will, but yours be done.” An odd note here: I wrote a hymn that includes that line in every verse. A Presbyterian scholar told me that it was one of only two hymns that he could find from the past hundred years that emphasized our submission to God’s will. To him it made perfect sense that it was by a Mennonite.

When we quote that line, touting Jesus’ submission, we tend to conveniently leave out is what comes before that — Jesus’ hours of tortured wrestling and prayer, when he says, “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me.” And only after that, the plea: “not my will but yours be done.”

What do we do with Jesus praying that the cup be taken from him? What do we do with Moses moving God? And what do we do with a God who on occasion changes course because of prayer?

What do we do when God doesn't change course?

There are, of course, no easy answers here. No convenient bullet points that I can give you to take home. But reflecting a bit on both Moses and Jesus can provide us with some direction. In both stories, Moses moving God and Jesus praying in Gethsemane, we get a glimpse of a real and profound relationship with God. These relationships were based on experience and mutual trust.

I say mutual, because God clearly trusted both Moses and Jesus. God had enough confidence in Moses that God offered to start the whole nation of Israel over again through Moses. God trusted Jesus enough to shape the history of the universe around his life. I think that God trusted them both so much that God could be vulnerable to them.

Here's the scary thing — I think that God offers that level of trust to every one of us. That is part of the lesson of this morning's parables — the shepherd, the widow and the father all extended themselves for their beloved ones. God values us so much that God will risk everything to be in relationship with us. We respond as we choose to God's vulnerability. Part of our response is faithful service and obedience. As we serve God and work in the world for God's purposes, we learn to trust God as a child would a parent, or as beloved friends or spouses trust each other.

I don't typically go for sports analogies. In this case though, it was really the best I could come up with. We've all seen this in baseball movies or in live games. The pitcher is struggling through an inning and has the bases loaded. The coach comes out to talk. The pitcher makes a case for staying in the game. The decision, of course, is the coach's. If there is no mutual trust, the pitcher might allow pride to distort what he tells the coach. The coach wouldn't believe him anyway, and would call in a reliever. The pitcher would leave the game angry. If there is mutual trust, the pitcher can be honest about his arm, and the coach can make a decision. If the pitcher truly trusts the coach, he'll count on the coach's judgment to be what is best for the team.

Because God trusts us, I think God believes us when we pray. I have this quote second-hand: “The problem with our prayers is that we pray from somewhere we are not, and God — who is faithful — answers to the place we've prayed from, and we are not there to hear the answer.”

Faithfulness on our part requires willingness to act, either for what we have asked, or for whatever God would have us do. Moses was still prepared to lead the stiff-necked Israelites, and Jesus would certainly have remained a great and faithful teacher had God taken the cup. We Mennonites know this bit well, and I think you here at Hyattsville have it down to an art-form — if we pray for peace, we had better be prepared to work for peace. God often moves when we are prepared to move along.

The flip side, and the difficult part of this equation, is figuring out what to do when God doesn't seem to move, or seems to move in a different direction. Here is where being vulnerable to God gets messy. This goes back to the necessity of relationship. Being vulnerable and trusting means accepting the “no.” Of course, if you read the Psalms or Job, you know that we don't always have to like it. We can continue to pray, and God is vulnerable to our anger and rage. Even expressing that anger demonstrates our firm belief in God's ability to act. If God couldn't act, why would we be angry? God accepts our anger.

My advisor at the seminary, Rebecca Slough, gave me a great image for prayer — that of being in tune with God. Perfect for a musician, isn't it? The more we move alongside of God, the more we grow into harmony with God's desires.

Our relationship with God is like being a part of a jazz combo. God is the composer and the bandleader, and gives us the basics — the chord charts, the riffs and some melodies to play with. Most of what we do, however, is improvisation. We create our own melodies and harmonies in response to God's music. In essence, we become co-composers with God — we collaborate in playing out our own lives. Prayer, then, is keeping time with God, staying in tune and listening carefully for what comes next. We can provide our own flavor — we can even offer shifts that might take the music a new

direction. God takes what we offer and weaves it into the texture of the piece.

God welcomes our complete honesty. Do we trust God enough to offer it?

Are we willing to complain to God? To cry to God? To ask God to move in a new direction? And are we willing to work in harmony with God, whatever tune God may play?