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After the church was born at Pentecost, it initially grew like a wildfire. Thousands of people joined the new community of Christ. The disciples, now called apostles, were performing miracles that formerly only Jesus did. When they were arrested, the church prayed for them, and the apostles were released. For the first five chapters of the Book of Acts, the movement appears unstoppable.

Then, in the sixth chapter, the story of the new church took a hard turn when the resistance to it turned into severe persecution. A deacon named Stephen was publicly martyred, and many of the Christians in Jerusalem had to abandon their homes and flee for their lives. This is the chapter of the story when the church realizes that God does not always protect Christians from painful experiences, even though they pray.

You also had a chapter in life when you discovered that your prayers do not have a leash on God. You had prayed for a loved one who was ill, or a job you desperately wanted, needed, or a relationship that was in trouble, or maybe a dark night the soul you hoped to avoid. Sometimes you received what you asked from God. Often you did not. And how many prayers down through the ages has the church offered in times of disaster, war, famine, social injustice, pandemic?

What are we expecting to happen when we make our petitions to God?

When we get to our text today in the 12th chapter of Acts, we are told, “King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church.” This Herod was the grandson of Herod the Great who killed the children of Bethlehem after Jesus was born, and the nephew of Herod Antipas who tried Jesus before his crucifixion. Like all the Herods before him, he was hungry for power, and needed all the support he could get. So when King Herod learned that the growing church made the religious establishment anxious, he arrested the apostle James, and then killed him. When this helped his popularity polls, Herod then also arrested Peter.

We are told that on the night Peter was arrested, “the church prayed fervently for him.” But don’t you think that the church also prayed fervently for James who was killed in spite of their prayers for his release? So what exactly was the nature of their “fervent prayers” for Peter? Had they learned to lower their expectations after James was killed? Were they just saying, “O Lord, give him comfort in prison?” “O Lord, give him courage in his hour of death? Or did they still risk saying, “O Lord, please get Peter out of jail.”

When someone falls into the hands of a deadly disease, and it looks like death is imminent, a pastor is frequently asked, “How should we pray? Do we pray for healing?” What people are often worried about is what if the loved one dies in spite of our prayers? What would that say about our faith? Or even more threatening, what would it say about God?

About this I am certain - you don’t have to be God’s spin-doctor. None of us is called to ensure God comes out looking good after a tragedy unfolds. And I am also certain that prayer is never the place to lower expectations. There is no way to pray and play it safe. The most definitive words Jesus spoke about prayer were, “Ask, seek, knock on the door.” He never told us to pray for the ability not to care what happens. Instead, he illustrated from his own prayers that prayer is the place where the yearnings of the heart are lifted to heaven.

We have so many questions about prayer, and the subtext of most of them is, “Does it work? Does prayer change things?” The answer to that question is a resounding “Yes.” But mostly what prayer changes is the person who is doing the praying. That is because prayer places you into the presence of God. How can you stand in God’s presence and not be changed?

This was not Peter's first trip to prison. It was his third. The last time, when he miraculously escaped from prison, he returned to the authorities to preach some more about the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. This is a perfect love that casts out fear. And having communed with that love is why Peter isn't worried during this third arrest. Look at how his imprisonment is described. He is bound with two chains, sleeping between two soldiers, with two more soldiers posted outside his cell. He's not up all night worried about his life. When an angel appeared in the cell, it was with a great light. But the angel still has to nudge Peter and say, "Get up!" to awaken him.

Clearly, this is not a man who is up all night with fear of dying. Maybe that is because Peter expects to be rescued. But more probably it is because Peter has already moved beyond both anxiety and expectations. He's has found the peace of knowing he is in God's hands whatever happens. That kind of holy peace only comes through prayer.

Sometimes our prayers don't even have words. Or there are no words. Sometimes, as Paul said, the Holy Spirit has to pray on our behalf. But prayer is always a way of standing before God with our own hands open. That is the posture of faith. Hand out, palms up, ready to trust in the faithfulness of God. The only alternative is to try to cling with your fists to what we ultimately can never keep anyway.

In my line of work, I get to a lot of weddings, which means like all pastors I do a lot of pre-marital counseling. Mike and Sue had come to see me several times in preparation for their marriage. I thought we had made our way through the important dynamics of their life under a vow and were heading into the last session when we were going to work on the wedding. But just as I began to diagram the ceremony, Mike interrupted me. "I just have to say I am really, really frightened." So, he now had Sue's attention. Seeing her start to tear up he quickly took her hands and said, "Oh, I'm not afraid of marrying you. I'm afraid of losing you. When my mother died, I barely survived that. I love you more than her, and if anything happens to you..." He couldn't finish the sentence but looked at me with these big puppy eyes. I knew what he wanted me to say. He wanted me to say, "Oh, nothing is going to happen to either of you. You're young!" But I have buried too many young people to say that.

So instead, I said, "In my experience, 100 percent of marriages come to an end. And you're not going to beat those odds. Either through divorce or death, all marriages end. But let's think about the best possible future for your life together – say 60 to 70 years of extraordinary love, constantly growing closer and closer to the point that your souls are so intertwined you cannot imagine life without each other. Still a day will come when one you places the other into the arms of God. And that is going to be excruciating. What you are afraid may happen, will happen. And it is going to tear your heart out. And that's absolutely the best scenario. Why would you want to go through all the pain of worrying about that day? I say give her up today. Get the grief out of the way by giving her life, and your life, back to God." I was trying to invite him to discover the peace that comes only from holding it all with open hands before the open hands of God.

Yes, things can be taken out of open hands, but they can also be wrenched out of fists. The blessings we care about the most can only be received, a day at a time. And it is certainly the only way to enjoy anything and anyone. Prayer is how we open our hands.

After Peter finally woke up and followed the angel out of jail, the first thing he did was go to the church that was having a prayer meeting for his release. He gets to the front gate of the house where the Christians are praying, and he begins to bang on the doors. A servant girl named Rhoda comes to the door with the intent of quieting this guy who is disturbing the prayer meeting. She is astonished to see Peter. She's so astonished that she leaves him outside and runs to tell the others that their prayers have been answered. But those in prayer have grown so accustomed to being disappointed that they don't believe her. They tell Rhoda, "You are out of your mind."

Isn't that amazing? The church is praying, "O Lord, please release Peter." The servant girl says, "You can stop praying. Peter is knocking on the door." And all the church can say is, "That can't be right." They are so busy knocking on heaven's door, they cannot believe that heaven is knocking on their door.

Prayer is not just our conversation before God. It is our communion with Holy, Holy, Holy. We can begin prayer by bringing our petitions, confessions, fears, laments, and questions. But if we stay in prayer and attend to whom we are praying, eventually the questions of "Why?" and "When" and "Will you?" give way to the far more profound question of "Who?" Who is God and who are we as the sheep of God's hand?

Sometimes God says "Yes" to our prayers, as on this night when the church prayed for Peter's release. Sometimes God says "No" to our prayers as on the night James was executed, or the night Jesus asked in the Garden of Gethsemane to be spared from the cross. At all times, our prayers bring us into the presence of Holy God. And that is what changes us, which may be the greatest miracle of all. Amen.