



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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May 24, 2009
7th Sunday of Easter
Acts 7:54-60
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Acts 7:54-60
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 8
Second Lesson: Hebrews 7:11-27
Gospel: John 17:11-19

Answered Prayer?

Reason's answer
The faith of Stephen's answer

I certainly don't encourage you to find your theological training in country music, but there is a truth stated, somewhat askew, that can be learned from the Garth Brooks song from a few years back. I think the name of the song was "Sometimes God's Greatest Gift is Unanswered Prayer." It's a little bit screwed up in the way he stated it because what he is talking about is sometimes God's greatest gift is when he says "no," right? Unanswered prayer, ungranted prayer, but the answer was obviously "no."

There's something for us to learn in this – that God always answers prayer. He is always going to answer prayer in the best possible way. That's what a lot of our readings are focused on today, right? Jesus praying for us in the Garden – we are told how Jesus in the Second Lesson is in heaven and serves as a priest for interceding for us and how he served as the great high priest by offering himself once for all, for all the sins of all the world. We learned that he is a different kind of priest, the priest in the order of Melchizedek. We heard him pray, "Lord, protect them," in the Gospel we read. "While I was in the world, I protected them. Now I'm asking that you not take them out of the world but that you protect them."

Now as we think about our First Lesson, human reason might say the answer wasn't that great. Jesus prayed that God would protect his people, the Father would protect those who were his own, and here is Stephen standing up and boldly proclaiming God's Word to the people and the people gnashing their teeth at him and then the people dragging him out, acting like a bunch of kids covering their ears and screaming as loud as they can so they don't hear what they need to hear, and they take him outside the city and throw stones at him long enough until he dies. "I thought Jesus prayed for our protection" is what human reason would be screaming. Human reason would be saying, "A lot of good it did Stephen to be a Christian."

He had just been chosen to be one of the deacons that helped the apostles by waiting on the tables and delivering the food to the widows. We just read about that in the chapter before this. And now this service to God has gotten him nothing but bloodied, bruised and killed. Human reason looks at it and says "This is nuts! Why in the world would anyone want to follow a God that lets something like this happen to the people that are serving him faithfully? Obviously this shows that God does not have power to

protect those who are his own. Obviously this shows that this God is no God at all if he lets this happen to people that are serving him and doing what he has told them to do. Better off to keep your mouth shut instead of putting yourself on the line and suffering something like what happened to Stephen.”

You and I know we are probably not in danger of having someone throw enough stones at us to kill us, but have we ever said to ourselves that it’s better to keep our mouths shut and not say what is right before God so that we don’t lose a friend, so we don’t get viewed as a religious nut, so that we don’t have this or that happen to us? Are we better off not to suffer those things than to open up and say “This is what God says and this is what is right and I’m saying it because I love you and I want you to know God.” Human reason tells us to keep our mouth shut, change the topic, talk about the weather, talk about the Packers, talk about anything else except the things that concern eternity.

You look at this and think “Jesus’ prayers in heaven on our behalf must not be all that powerful. They certainly don’t seem to be doing Stephen a lot of good.” As you look around in your life, do you ever find yourself thinking the same thing? “If Jesus is interceding for me, why is this happening? Why is this happening to me? Why am I struggling in this area of my life? Why am I struggling in this relationship? Why am I struggling at work? Why am I struggling financially? Why is my job in danger? Why have I lost my job? God, if you’re there to protect me, how come you are letting these things happen to me?”

According to our sinful nature, we will have all kinds of things that will question the love of God. They question the protection of God. They question the purpose of God. And there is one simple reason why you and I will do this. It’s because we are sinners and sin makes us stupid. We question the love of a God who created us even though in his divine foreknowledge he knew that mankind would rebel against him and say “forget you, God. I know better. I’m eating the fruit.”

He knew beforehand that you and I would deny him before others, that we would use his name to express nothing but our anger and our frustration, and we would teach our children to do the same by the example we set for them. Not only did he still create us, he still came to this world and lived and died for us to take every one of the sins that you and I commit knowingly and unknowingly. And you and I still can sit at times in our little pool of self pity and say, “God, why aren’t you doing more to take care of me?”

Look closely at what Jesus prayed for in his high priestly prayer in our Gospel today. If you noticed, I only quoted a portion of what Jesus prayed. He said, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.” That is Jesus’ high priestly prayer, that God protect us from the evil one, not that he take us out of the world, not that he make our life smooth sailing and nothing but joy and happiness. He doesn’t say “I pray that you never let sorrow into their lives.” He says, “Father, protect them from the evil one.”

While human reason may look at our lives and may look at Stephen's life and say "God doesn't always do such a great job of protecting us," the problem is that our sights are set too low. We are only looking at the things of this world, not on what truly is important; protecting us from the evil one.

Look at Stephen's responses. He boldly speaks because he believes Jesus is the only answer for salvation. He boldly speaks because faith has convinced him that his sins have been taken away by the life and death of Christ and that God has put him in that place at that time to speak the Word of God faithfully no matter what the outcome might be. And then he says, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." He looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and it strengthened him to continue to serve God. Then as they are throwing the stones at him, look at his faith and how it imitates Christ. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He is imitating the cry of Jesus on the cross. "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." He is imitating the cry of Jesus as he was nailed to the cross.

Did God answer Jesus' prayer to protect him from the evil one? Most certainly because Stephen was focused on the glory of God, not the things of just this world. He was focused on how he could bring the glory of God to these people and they didn't want it, but that wasn't in his control. What was in his control was where his focus was. It wasn't on "Lord, why would you let them throw these stones at me? Lord, why did you put such big stones in this area? Lord, why didn't you make stones a little softer when you created the world?" He could have gone in all these different areas in blaming God, but instead he said, "Lord, I see the glory of God. Lord, receive my spirit. Lord, don't hold this sin against them."

When our focus is on the glory of God, we can do these things that are not in our sinful nature but are in the spirit that lives in us. So you might say when we are in the middle of our own pool of self pity, how can we see the glory of God? We don't look up to heaven and see heaven open and see Jesus standing at the right hand of God. But we can. You and I can see the glory of God every day of our lives. That's why he has given us his Word in so many different sizes, shapes and media so that we can see the glory of God and the certain love he has for us. Today we can come to his altar and see the glory of God and smell it and taste it as we receive his very body and blood that was given and shed to take away our sins. If that isn't glorious and this knowledge that he forgives us, if that doesn't strengthen us, then the problem is us, not God.

Think about it. He gives us his very body and blood so that we would know that the sacrifice is certain, that our sins are forgiven and that we are one with him. That's his glory. His glory is seeing that he has opened heaven to us, and it is open. It's the water wings that keep us from drowning in the pool of our self pity—the forgiveness and the love that God has for us in Jesus.

When Stephen focused on it, he prayed for those who were killing him. When you and I focus on it, we also will imitate Christ by continuing to cling to our Father's love. And

maybe our faith will soar to those heights too where we also pray for those who are hurting us and that we offer them God's love and forgiveness as God so freely offered us love and forgiveness.

Faith answers, "Yes, God has protected me from the evil one because heaven is open to me."