

Sunday, September 17, 2023

First Lesson: Matthew 7:7

Second Lesson: 1 Chronicles 4:10

Sermon Series: Prayers that Move Mountains Week

One: Jabez

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

- We are beginning a new sermon series called, “Prayers that Move Mountains.” This is a 4 week sermon series that will use our First Lesson of Matthew 7:7 that we just heard and that will serve as the central theme of the sermon series; “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you;” and see how it manifests itself in each focused prayer of study for the week, with the hope that our discoveries will speak to our life situations and experiences of today.
- In addition, the sermon format for how we will engage in conversation each week will be by

applying the Wesleyan Quadrilateral Model as a tool, to ensure that how we are engaging our scriptures are thorough and exhaustive;

- For just a quick recap on what this Wesleyan quadrilateral model is; The United Methodist Church, asserts that “John Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, **illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.**
- Furthermore, when I shared with the class on Wednesday night, my hope of using Matthew 7:7 as our central focus and perhaps desired outcome for our prayer lives, I was met with a lot of considerations and questions that I had not considered; hence why I value having such a class to begin with.
- For the purpose of the Wednesday Night Applying the Sermon to Life class, is to ensure that the

preacher and the congregation are in a collaborative and open discussion together;

- **That informs the preacher** what the spiritual heartbeat and concerns are of the community;
- **That informs the preacher** whether or not the preacher is conveying theological concepts in a way that both resonates and edifies the community.
- So this is why I value this type of weekly interaction and engagement as your primary preacher and teacher of the scriptures.
- Furthermore, when looking at Matthew 7:7 and asking for us to consider this as a point of focus for our community; I believe bringing in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral Model in conversation with it— in addition to the prayers that we will be studying, will address many of our questions, in a way that will be life-giving to our faith journeys.
- Therefore looking at the first step of the Quadrilateral Model, it is important to name that in

the Methodist tradition and faith, we always begin with scripture as our starting place.

- For scripture is where we can discern and detect the movement of God.
- Scripture is the only written documentation that we have of God's breathed Word into humanity.
- Furthermore, how the tradition weaves into our lessons this morning, will hopefully answer why Matthew 7:7 is a helpful starting place of focus for us to consider as it pertains to prayer;
- For where our first lesson of scripture comes from, is a place of Jewish tradition.
- Furthermore, this aspect of the Jewish tradition that I am about to share, closely resembles and influences our traditions of today.
- For starters, the term "seeking" is often used in the OT and Jewish tradition for prayer, with God's will as the object;

- The terms knocking and asking was a Jewish expression for prayer as well;
- Thereby making the first three words of this lesson, ask, seek and knock, not being three different or distinct actions; as one of our table of scholars from Wednesday night inquired.
- For there are no stages of spiritual experience here —**but three Jewish expressions for prayer.**
- Furthermore, the application of ask, seek, and knock, gives a character to prayer, **that makes it more than a shopping list directed to heavenly dispensary;** which was another theological concern raised in our class on Wednesday night.
- Prayer in this tradition is to be seen **as a quest and an expectation;**
- For what our first lesson of Matthew is inviting the people of this day and the people of today to experience when engaging this verse of scripture **is simply encouragement;** encouragement that we

can bring our human needs to God in prayer, **not to inform or persuade God**, but to be an expression to us in relation to God— **as dependent children who ultimately are in control of our own lives.**

- For upon reflecting on Alex's two past sermons on what life is like in the desert, **the biggest aha moment that I have arrived to**, is that ultimately **we are in control of what we choose to do in our desert moments.**
- This Church family is the essence of the free will that God has given us as God's children; the ability **to think on our own, to act on our own, to respond on our own**—this is free will.
- It's similar to as I am living into what it means to be a mother of two college young women-- whom I have raised as best as I can.
- One late evening, I woke up to my phone alerting me on the Life360 app that all of my family is subscribed to; it is an app that lets us know when

we have left home, our driving speed, our specific location and more.

- Well one evening, I was awakened to an alert at 2 am in the morning, that let me know that my daughter who is lives in the dorms at UNL, just arrived back to her dorm.
- So I immediately woke up Stephen and said “Stephen, Keera is just NOW arriving back to her dorm!”
- So I breathed, **because Stephen basically helped me to breathe...**and I prayed silently to myself and went back to bed.
- The next morning I woke up and the first thing that I did was texted her to say, “Did you have fun and were you safe?”
- My daughter hearted my text, and said she was safe.
- She seemed grateful that I checked on her.

- We went onto to chat about other things and all is well.
- In my text, to her though, I could see Matthew 7:7 coming alive for us, where I simply wanted my child to know that she can depend on me if she is in trouble;
- **I wanted her to know** that she can rely on me, if she needed guidance.
- **I wanted her to be** encouraged to know, that I was a safe space that if she should find herself in her own desert situation, I would be right there to guide her out;
- All she would needed to do is **ask, seek, knock** and I will be there in a New York minute.
- **And for most of us, I suspect that this mother/daughter experience that I have shared, many of us can relate to and understand.**
- However, when it comes to many of our prayer lives with God, I find that it doesn't always translate



as smoothly in our desert moments; **this idea that you and I can come to God in a similar way as my daughter can come to me.**

- For on Wednesday Night, there were a lot of prayer confessions and varied prayer experiences that came up in our group, that made it difficult for some of us to be able to really lean into and embrace the prayer of Jabez fully.
- For some of the prayer confessions that came up were statements such as, “I don’t pray to God,” “I don’t know what I should ask, I don’t know if God is listening, I don’t know if I trust it, I don’t know if I believe it.”
- There were some who voiced that prayer was used to weaponize them—for admittedly, there have been painful aspects of our Christian history as it pertains to our queer siblings, women, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous People of Color) to name just a

few; where the idea of prayer has been both painful and triggering.

- On the flip side, there were other Wesleyan quadrilateral experiences, where some of our classmates have enjoyed the silent contemplative moments that prayer offers them;
- For it is in those experiences where we may find that praying can offer comfort, reflection, meditation, liberation and direction.
- Furthermore, I raise these varied prayer experiences up to God our loving Creator, to ask God on behalf of our community, to begin to reset us, restore us, renew us and transform us in our prayer experiences—the good, bad and the ugly.....
- For in doing so I believe, this allows us to begin to fully experience the prayer of Jabez this morning of our second lesson;

- For the main thing I would like to highlight out of Jabez's life experience was that he was essentially born into brokenness.
- His life essentially began in the metaphorical desert as Alex walked us through.
- For you see, the meaning of Jabez's name means "giving sorrow."
- For some reason his mother had given him this depressing name.
- However, in his prayer Jabez modeled the tradition of Matthew 7:7 as I have explained it earlier and asked **that it be not to my sorrow** (v. 10).
- For you see Church, another way to look at the three words of **ask, seek, and knock**, is to translate them into our own desert moments ideas of *want, loss, and earnestness*.
- In which **Ask—seek—knock**—becomes three levels of prayer.

- For **if asking** does not bring results, one should **seek** over a period of time, persistently praying and waiting on God to know God's will.
- **If seeking** does not succeed, then one should desperately **knock**. This suggests earnest, intense, urgent prayer, that will not be satisfied until some kind of an answer comes.
- Keeping in mind that often times, the answer will lead us to "Not my will, but thy will..."
- However it is this process that I have learned in my own life experiences, that the ask, seek, knock prayer process will inevitably teach us how to accept God's will;
- It will inevitably teach us how to adapt to our desert moments, trusting that a crocus will eventually appear.
- For Jabez, we have here but the fragmentary chronicle of a saintly person of an ancient time.

- Where his name commemorates the **sorrow** or *pains* of his mother at his birth, but that is not how Jabez story ends, for he **was more honorable than his siblings**, more famous, more devoted to the God of Israel, perhaps more wealthy and powerful.
- Jabez is specially honored and distinguished for his comprehensive prayer.
- In the midst, perhaps, of surrounding idolatry, he **called on the God of Israel.**
- **He called on God as I share his story in first person to Bless me**—In his own person, heart, and life, leaving his outcome to have the special benediction of Jehovah.
- **He called on God to Enlarge my coast**—Increase my territorial possessions. Perhaps from being a child of sorrow he had been despised by his siblings, and limited in his possessions; and so

he looks, not to man, but to God, to extend his borders.

- **Jabez called on God for God's hand to be with him**—and it would be God's hand that would strengthen, encourage, and assist him. Jabez would have the God of Israel work with him and in his behalf.
- Finally Jabez called on God to **Keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me**—where The Lord's prayer ends with this same petition, though expressed in slightly different terms.
- Either way we see a person using his choice to ask for guidance out of his desert birth experience and we witness the doors being open to him as a result of doing so.
- **For what his mother called him, was countered by his calling on God.**

- **And so for some listening to this sermon, our Wesleyan quadrilateral reasoning and interpretation of these events, as to why Jabez's metaphorical doors were opened, may still be unclear or up for further discussion.**
- Furthermore, although I admittedly am driven mainly by the authority of scripture and my own life experiences that greatly informs my faith and belief in the power of prayer;
- There was a riveting conversation that I had with Martha Gadberry on Wednesday night, that not only informed my reasoning as it pertains to prayer, but has encouraged me to dive even further in this prayer series with a greater sense of assurance, anticipation and expectation of all that Matthew 7:7 could hold for our lives.
- For Martha shared with me a lesson that she intends to share with our adult small group class

with Crosstalk in which she gave me permission to share in my sermon as it pertains to prayer.

- The topic that she will be presenting to the class comes from an article entitled; “Neurotheology: This is Your Brain on Religion.”
- In sharing some brief excerpts from this article;

For thousands of years, religion has posed some unanswerable questions: Who are we? What's the meaning of life? What does it mean to be religious? In an effort to address those questions, [Dr. Andrew Newberg](#) has scanned the brains of praying nuns, chanting Sikhs and meditating Buddhists. He studies the relationship between the brain and religious experience, a field called neurotheology. And he's written a book, *Principles of Neurotheology*, that tries to lay the groundwork for a new kind



of scientific and theological dialogue.

He goes on to share in the article: "[We] evaluate what's happening in people's brains when they are in a deep spiritual practice like meditation or prayer," Newberg says. He and his team then compare that with the same brains in a state of rest. "This has really given us a remarkable window into what it means for people to be religious or spiritual or to do these kinds of practices."

Newberg's scans have also shown the ways in which religious practices, like meditation, can help shape a brain. Newberg describes one study in which he worked with older individuals who were experiencing memory problems. Newberg took scans of their brains, then taught them a mantra-based

type of meditation and asked them to practice that meditation 12 minutes a day for eight weeks. At the end of the eight weeks, they came back for another scan, and Newberg found some dramatic differences.

According to Newberg, many of the participants related that they were thinking more clearly and were better able to remember things after eight weeks of meditation. Remarkably, the new scans and memory tests confirmed their claims.

"They had improvements of about 10 or 15 percent," Newberg says. "This is only after eight weeks at 12 minutes a day, so you can imagine what happens in people who are deeply religious and spiritual and are doing these practices for hours a day for years and years."

- Church Family, this for me and more is the power of our prayers when we learn how to call on the name of Jesus through our prayers.
- I will close with a phraseology that my former mentor the late Rev. Junius Dotson would say before the congregation when it was time to enter into communal prayer that I always resonated with, but now I am considering was more prophetic and theologically sound than I have ever thought about before;
- He would proclaim to the Church; ***Where there is much prayer, there is much power; little prayer, little power...no prayer....no power!***
- May this sermon plant the mustard seed needed to equip us in our work, with a sense of courageous power wherever our feet is led to kiss the Earth!

- Let the Church Say Amen!

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