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The National Presbyterian Church

## Strong Medicine

Mark 9:14-29

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I wonder whether this is a good time for me to bare my soul and make a confession. Don't tell anybody, but I have always had a problem with prayer. Perhaps that is not a good thing to confess in this decent assembly of orderly Presbyterians. Presbyterians are praying people. We have prayers of confession, which we follow up with prayers to absolve us of what we just finished confessing. We have prayers of the people, for the people, done by the people. We have prayers of thanksgiving even when we don't feel like we've been given anything we want to thank anybody for. We have creedal prayers that are so long we have to put them in a book to read them rather than pray them, because if we prayed that long we might as well be Baptists. We pray for big things, like our country, for serious things, like war and peace, for individual things, like health, and for mundane things, like keeping your eyes open during the length and breadth of this sermon.

With all this praying going on *all* around me, it's no wonder that I feel a little hesitant about confessing that I have always had a problem with praying. They say that confessions are good for the soul. So, I confess: From the very beginning of my young Christian life as a Baptist growing up in the small town of Smithfield, Virginia, I have had a prayer problem.

Some of the longest, most musically accompanied, most theatrically dramatized prayers take place in a Baptist worship service. They are some of the most sincere and powerful statements of faith you will ever in your life have the privilege to hear. And yet, despite growing up around all of that rhetorical and spiritual beauty and honesty, I did not like being called on to pray in public one bit. Part of

it was that our minister liked to surprise unsuspecting parishioners by calling on them without any prior notice, right out of the blue, in a packed sanctuary, to just stand up and give the prayer for the day. It was like a pop quiz from heaven. “Brian, you ready to pray this morning?” I was NEVER ready to pray. Especially in public. Who knows what to say to God when other people are listening in. Half the time I wanted God to do something to or about one of them. Of course, I outgrew that.

Private praying was a problem too. ‘Cause it seemed to me growing up that God delivered on prayers with the same statistical frequency that basketball player Shaquille O’Neal used to deliver on foul shots. It was a hit and more often miss kind of thing. Sometimes you got what you wanted, much of the time you didn’t. Then at church on Sunday, just after the minister had made you break out into a cold sweat by calling on YOU to pray the prayer of the day, he’d declare right after you’d just finished asking God for ALL kinds of things in your prayer, that, while God always answers every prayer, sometimes God answers “No.” Well, that kind of doesn’t do a whole lot for a teenage boy who’s depending on God to deliver. Especially since God doesn’t even have the common social decency to speak up for God’s self. After a while, you start to feel like you’re talking to yourself.

You know, if you’re out in the street walking around and talking to yourself people think you’re strange. But if you get down on your knees in a sanctuary or in your bedroom and talk to yourself for hours on end, people throw a robe around you and send you off to seminary. That’s how I ended up here before you today on the pulpit preaching this Presbyterian proclamation on prayer. I was talking to myself on my knees too much back when I was a 13 and 14 year old Baptist. And I didn’t even know what was worse. Whether I was mad that God was *not* talking back, or whether I was scared to death that God would one day **START** talking back. The only thing crazier than looking like you’re talking to yourself is acting like you’re actually talking to God. It’s not just how it looks, it’s how God might sound, what God might say. What WOULD God say if I didn’t control the conversation so that what I heard was what I thought God OUGHT to say? What if God actually starting saying what GOD wanted to say? What would I do then? Because who in the world knows what God might want you to do? I KNEW the Bible. I knew what God told people like Jeremiah and Isaiah and Ezekiel and Amos and Hosea and Jesus to do. And, excuse me, but none of those stories really ended up all that well. Maybe, I thought, it’s better if I do all the talking and God just kind of listens in after all.

See, that's why, now that I am no longer a child and no longer a Baptist, that I still have a prayer problem. It's not because God doesn't talk back or because God doesn't give me everything I want, it's because I realize that being in conversation with God, praying to God and really listening for the direction of God that comes in and after the moment of prayer, puts you in the unenviable position of possibly being used by God to further those causes that God--*not you, but GOD*--is really concerned about. Prayer is like strong medicine that way. You go to it wanting it just to take care of the particular pain that's pestering you and nothing else. But once it's inside you there are going to be side effects because strong medicine is just too strong to do only what you want it to do. So is prayer. Read the label very carefully before you resort to using it.

See, I think the disciples here in this story know this even as they ask Jesus, "Why could we not cast the demon out?" They've had situations where they've had to exorcise before, heal before, and teach before, and they've operated successfully. But this time they fail because this time something they haven't apparently been doing before they act is required. That something appears to be prayer. "Yes," Jesus seems to be saying, "you took care of the other demons, you had the necessary faith to handle the other demons, but this kind can only be driven out by prayer."

Well, the disciples had to have known about prayer. Right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, back in Chapter one, they go searching for Jesus. When they find him, they find him praying. They've seen Jesus, and we've read about Jesus praying several times up to this point in Mark's Gospel. But we have never seen the disciples praying. In fact, this text is the very first time that Mark even uses the word prayer. This fact alone highlights the word here. Which of course leads us to examine Mark's understanding of the meaning of prayer.

For Mark, prayer is connected with the power of belief; it is asking God for anything with the believing world view that God has the power to deliver. But it is also the belief, especially significant in this text, that God has the power to transform hopeless situations into hopeful ones. Perhaps also it is the foreboding suspicion that the disciple who is seeking change can him or herself also end up BEING changed in the process.

Maybe, as dull as the disciples appear to be, they weren't so dull that they didn't understand this prayer property. Prayer was the nitroglycerin of the faith world. It was an explosive power that could do great things, but you had to be very careful with it. It was unstable. It could very easily surge out of control. Yes, it could change the

world, but it could just as easily blow up in your face, turn around and change YOU, twist the life you took years to sculpt all out of shape.

But that is just the point. Praying for somebody else, praying to change someone else's situation and state in life just might also end up changing your own life. That's why the disciples are not praying. It's not because they don't know about prayer. It is because they **KNOW** about prayer. What if the prayers they unleash not only kick the demon out of that father's son, but then also turn around, kick them off their waffling, doubting, unsure backsides, and then drive them out to instigate boundary breaking acts of provocative, liberating ministry? Jesus' kind of ministry? Eating with tax collectors and sinners, partying with prostitutes, touching lepers, cavorting with women, breaking Sabbath tradition, declaring all foods clean, and cozying up to **Gentiles**, the same kind of boundary breaking, 'we're-gonna-crucify-you-if-you-don't-stop-doing-them' kinds of ministry that got Jesus killed?

What if we prayed for victims of natural and human disasters and God ended up sending US to help them? What if we prayed that God's church do something about the desperate economic, political, and educational plight of the poor and God told US that WE were the ones God was expecting to act? What if we prayed that God come into our world to transform it into the kind of world that God said God always wanted and God said, "I already have. I sent you!"

Do you see the problem? What if the prayers we fired out THERE not only went out there, but also did a 180 and turned back HERE on us?

I've been trying to think of an illustration for what prayer is like in the way that I've been talking about it here. I thought first prayer might be like an arrow, once you fire it out, you can't get it back. Words are like that, but not prayers, not quite. Prayers are more like, well, they make us, the folk who pray them, kind of like . . . Dr. Frankenstein. Prayers are our Frankenstein monsters. They are living things, and once we give them life, we can't control how they're going to act, what action they're going to elicit from God, or how the villagers of our world are going to respond to them. It's like being a parent, right? Except in our case, instead of bringing forth a baby, we bring forth a full blown teenager, right at the climactic point of raging adolescence, who has no life context for dealing with all the hormonal changes detonating inside. Talk about a horror movie. It gives complete new meaning to the cry, "It's ALIVE!!!"

Prayers are ALIVE! POWERFULLY alive. They do crazy, improbable, impossible things. I think, for example, of the prayers of my mom and dad. When my two brothers and I were growing up, they

were on their knees praying so much that I'm surprised they ever walked upright. They prayed about everything. Some kids grow up hearing about how their parents walked 5 miles to school, in the snow, with no shoes, you know the routine, uphill both ways. My parents had prayer stories like that. When we started driving, on their knees. When we applied to college, on their knees. When we started serious dating, on their knees. When we got married, on their knees. When our wives had our first babies, on their knees. When we moved hundreds of miles away from them to pursue the lives and the dreams they had inspired in us, even while they were standing there waving goodbye, tears streaming down their faces as our cars were pulling off, they were on their knees. Other parents walked miles and miles to get to school. My mom and dad crawled miles and miles, on their knees, uphill all the way it sometimes seemed, to get us to the power of God.

That's the message of the Transfiguration after all. Mark positions it right in the middle of the solemn facts about Jesus' suffering and death and the inability of Jesus' disciples to carry on his legacy of exorcism and healing for a reason. The Transfiguration is the promise that God is listening, that even though you don't hear God talking back, God is even now working out the strategy for victory. Right in the middle of all of this despair and disappointment, Mark inserts just a glimmer of Jesus' glory. Up on that mountaintop, standing beside Moses and Elijah, and commanding a stature way more impressive than either of them, Jesus appears to be the very Messiah they have so wished him to be. It doesn't make any sense, because really, Jesus has just said he's going to suffer and die. That is a fact. The Transfiguration is God's promise that the facts do not present the truth. Prayer is like that. Prayer is the *living* truth standing defiantly in the face of *dead* facts.

The Transfiguration message is: don't stop praying when it looks hopeless, and because in that hopeless situation you don't hear God talking back. That's how it is with prayer. If you pay attention, like in this sanctuary right now, you can almost hear God listening.

God IS listening. That's why it is so important to be so very careful with prayer. Prayer is like alcohol, you can get drunk on it if you're not careful. If they had prayer factories, and they advertised prayer on television, packaged prayer in churches, and sold prayer on the streets, they'd probably want to have commercials that not only advertised prayer, but also reminded us to pray responsibly. Prayer has lots of faith calories. A believer could get a big, fat prayer gut, could lose focus on reality. You've seen people walking around church with a prayer buzz. Like they could do anything. Have anything. And yet

they're going around breaking up every sacred thing in sight. Not praying responsibly.

When you're praying responsibly, you don't pray angry. You don't ask God to enroll that troublesome member or that pastor who will never retire into a 'get into heaven early' admissions program.

You don't pray stupid. You don't ask for stuff you know you ought not to have.

You don't pray trivial. Like asking God to win your team's football game, even if it does appear to you that this would be the only just outcome of the day.

And you don't pray the way people pray. Remember how when Jesus said he was going to suffer and die, Peter rebuked Jesus? Jesus then told Peter angrily that Peter was thinking more the way people think than the way God thinks. Sometimes, God is praying for something different than what we people want and are praying for. The way many African American slaves prayed FOR the coming of the Civil War, the way a person with a decimated heart prays FOR the invasive surgery to implant a new one, God was apparently praying up a plan FOR Jesus' crucifixion. Peter would have prayed for Jesus' long life. God prayed for Jesus' crucifixion. And apparently, GOD was the one praying responsibly.

See, something like that, if you ask me, is exactly the reason why we ought to be very wary about resorting to prayer. We want the power to draw down God's force for change, but we want to dictate how that change comes. But real prayer, the kind of prayer Jesus talked about at 9:28-29, the kind that could drive out even the most malignant demon, doesn't operate like that. If you have a world view that God is active, then you put a thing in God's hands. You let the strong medicine of prayer go to work. You can't say a prayer to God and then tell God when and how to answer it. I figure, you gonna pray like that, your prayer isn't worth the ground you're groveling on. Trembling, we unleash our prayers to God, and then we trust God to work with them as God wills and needs.

I mean, you have to ask the question. Given the way God planned out human history, would the power of prayer that Jesus promised to his disciples, the power to do anything that the disciples asked, would that power have worked if the disciples had prayed for Jesus NOT to die? If you ask me, the toughest prayer was not the one where Jesus struggled with God, and asked God if God might take the cup of suffering from him. The toughest prayer was the one where Jesus aligned himself with God and prayed for God's will. That's the harder prayer for most of us because we often don't really know what God's will is. Then, we're afraid, not knowing what we're actually

praying for, what we're actually letting God decide for us. When someone is gravely ill, we don't know what God's will is. When some situation is careening out of control, we don't know what God's will is. When nature spews forth hurricanes and tornadoes and avalanches, and floods, we don't know what God's will is. And yet we are taught to pray for that will, even knowing that it could well be God's will that our world, or our lives, be transformed in a way that we hardly think we could bear. See how volatile, how dangerous prayer is?

Prayer is not about getting what we want, or even what we oftentimes are sure is right for us and those around us; prayer is about unleashing the frightening, unstable, uncontrollable power of God. That is, if we pray with the kind of prayer power that Jesus unleashed in Gethsemane, and that he tried to teach his disciples about when they confronted the demon possessing that father's son. As frightening as it is, this is prayer. Accept no substitutes. Kneel down and cry out the real thing.

You gonna pray? Get down on your knees, fall on your face, give up your pretenses, surrender your desire to be in control, and have an honest, open, *trusting-God's-will* kind of conversation.

Most of us don't like conflict, not with our spouses, not with our co-workers, especially not with someone more powerful than us. So we just hold things in, let them fester, don't have that conversation that we should have that will make us feel better and more than likely change the situation that we're stewing about. Don't let that be the way with God. Sure, it's reasonable, given how powerful God is, to want to avoid conflict with God. But if you're gonna pray, pray. None of this namby-pamby, decently and in order, maybe God answers maybe God doesn't, God answers in God's own good time, God always answers it's just that sometimes God answers "No", God doesn't give you what you want but what you need, this frozen-chosen, politically affirming, no hackles raising, cutest pie feeling, whispering in the darkness stuff. You gonna pray, you get up in God's face and call God out. You fire prayer out like the metaphysical explosive that it is and you let God take it from there.

"I believe, you HELP my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

"My God, My God, how DARE you forsake ME?"

(Mark 15:34).

"O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will NOT listen?"

(Habakkuk 1:1)

Our Father, who art in heaven, thy kingdom . . . **COME ON!!!**

Come on, Lord Jesus, do what it is you feel you must do.

Thy Will Be Done.

And when you finish, when you get up off your knees, you be man enough and woman enough to meet God where you've dared God to go. You call down the thunder, you better be ready for God's will to flood all over you. You better be ready to rain down God's power yourself, to work with God, to help provide the answer you fell on your knees seeking, to be ready to get out of the way if it turns out YOU are the one standing in the way of God's realization of YOUR prayer. God works outside the box, outside the church, outside the conventions we Christians sacralize, outside our expectations of what prayer ought to be. So, BE very, very careful, when you pray. Remember. Prayer is dangerous, desperate, defiant, and decidedly ALIVE.

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