
God is a Conversation

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell The Feast of the Transfiguration

Imagine that you are talking to a friend. Maybe she jumps right in or maybe she waits until the end of the conversation. You can tell that something is wrong. Her tone of voice changes and she says: "I have some bad news. Dad has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. He was able to hide it from us while Mom was alive, but now it's obvious that he doesn't always know who or where he is. I feel like I'm watching a little of him slip away each day. Please pray for us."

"Oh my," you say. "I'm so sorry. That sounds hard. I will pray for you and your father. Please let me know if there is anything else that I can do."

When the conversation is over and you are finally alone, you pause for a moment just to catch up with your feelings.

And then you have a decision to make.

How do you pray for your friend and her father?

Our first instinct is often to pray for a miracle. You might turn to the pages of the Book of Common Prayer that are dedicated to the Ministration to the Sick and look for a prayer that recites Jesus having raised Lazarus from the dead and calls on God to restore your friend's father to physical and mental health and give him a long and fruitful life.

This is a good prayer. It's honest, it comes from a place of love, and it stands solidly in the Christian tradition.

It's not always satisfying, though.

You are aware of the course that Alzheimer's typically runs. Cures are rare and, perversely, hoping that things are going to get better can make them worse by making it harder for families to learn how to be present to their loved ones as the disease advances.

You might go looking for another prayer.

Maybe this time you might look for one that recites the anguish that Jesus feels in the face of evil and suffering and calls on God to be with your friend and her father and to give them the strength and confidence that they will need to continue being with God and each other.

It's important to get to the being with part.

It doesn't help to minimize, explain away, or find a solution for the pain or loss that your friend and her family are suffering. A large part of what your friend is asking you to do is just to be with her. She knows deep down that watching her father slowly slip away is going to break her heart and standing beside him while it happens is going to be daunting at every level. She wants to know that she is not going to be alone as she faces this future with her father.

Something is still missing, though.

I wonder if at some level we resent having to bring this up with God. Why should we have to start the conversation and then wait around for God to answer? We don't even expect God to answer our prayer right

away. Instead, we say the words and then wait for God to do something later. We might feel some comfort or consolation when we ask, but we know that it's unlikely that we will ever get what we asked for. In fact, it seems that the more specific the request the more likely the answer will be some version of no.

What if we have gotten God wrong?

If you think about it, this doesn't sound like how the God of Israel that Jesus calls Father acts in the Bible. From the creation stories in Genesis to the resurrection stories in the Gospels, God is constantly taking the initiative. God is always starting the conversation by creating, calling, comforting, curing, charging, changing, or cajoling. We are the ones who are left to respond.

Imagine staring up at the sky on a clear, star-filled night. You are overwhelmed by feelings of awe and wonder. You can't help but feel a sense of gratitude. Yet, if you stop to thank God, you know that you are not starting a conversation. You are responding to a conversation that God started a long time ago.

The problem, I suspect, is not that it is up to us to start the conversation. It's that God doesn't always give us what we want. So often, God chooses to be with us rather than to be for us and fix our problems.

You might say that Jesus is what God being with us looks like. Indeed, the story of the early churches seems to be largely about their growing awareness that Jesus allows us to be with God in a new and different way.

You will remember that the first words Jesus teaches his disciples to pray are "Our Father." The early churches learned how to be with God by learning to stand where Jesus stands and say what Jesus says. Over time, their experience of prayer began to change. It began to feel like they were no longer the ones doing the praying. It felt like Jesus was praying in them. The act of prayer is primarily about the transformation that occurs when we let go of our self-centered hopes and dreams and align ourselves with the self-giving actions of Jesus.

Okay, you say. I get that God started a conversation by creating the universe and I get that the early churches came to understand prayer as Jesus praying in them, but I don't get what any of that has to do with my praying for my friend and her father. After all, wasn't I supposed to raise up my friend and her father to God and to ask God for help?

This is the very assumption that I want to challenge.

The key is to remember that God is already there. Wherever we are when we become aware of fear, pain, and suffering in our own life or in the lives of others, God is already there. We remind ourselves of this every time we say the twenty-third psalm. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me." But, as Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego experience when they discover God walking beside them in the flames of Nebuchadnezzar's furnace, God doesn't always rescue us from the fear, pain, and suffering that we are feeling.

In fact, the reverse is usually true. God reaches out from the place of fear, pain, and suffering and invites others to join in.

How does God do this?

God works through our emotions. The feelings of empathy, compassion, and fear that you felt when your friend told you about her father were triggered by God. God is the catalyst for our care and concern for others. God is the one who moves us to offer our love to them by praying for them. God then uses the love we offer to give life to others.

So, to get back to the question of whether we have gotten God wrong, I don't think it's right to say that we are the ones who start the conversation. It's God who speaks first. We are left to listen and respond.

This is where the metaphor of prayer as a conversation with God begins to break down.

God is not speaking to us one on one like another person might speak to us and we are not listening to God one on one as we might listen to another person. It's more like God is inviting us to join a conversation that has been going on for a long time.

You might even say that God is a conversation.

We traditionally understand God as the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three persons of the Trinity are so in each other that we call them one and, at the same time, so with each other that we call them three.

This is another way of saying that the essence of God is relationship.

I think the story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord shows us what joining in this conversation might look like.

I suspect that some of you were wondering if we were ever going to get to this story.

The story begins with Jesus taking Peter, James, and John up to the mountain top to pray. Although the disciples don't seem to be a vital part of the story, their witness to what happens and their response to what they see and hear is instructive to us.

The disciples witness Jesus open himself to a dimension of reality that seems to be beyond time and space. He joins in a conversation with God and another one with Moses and Elijah, the icons of Israel's identity as God's people. Jesus's appearance is altered (just as Moses' had been when he talked to God on the top of Sinai) as he allows God to pray in him.

This experience of being with God, however, does not save Jesus from the fear, pain, and suffering that he will experience as he goes to his death in Jerusalem.

Peter, seemingly trying to do for Jesus what God would not, offers to build three dwellings, one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Peter fails to understand that Jesus is not like the others. Moses died at the ripe old age of 120 and Elijah was swept up into heaven by a whirlwind. Jesus' path will not be so desirable. He must suffer through the fear, pain, and isolation of dying alone on a cross.

The story does ultimately become about the disciples when Peter's suggestion prompts a cloud to descend on the mountain top and the voice of God to come out of the cloud to remind the disciples of who Jesus is and how they should follow him. The voice says, "This is my son, my Chosen. Listen to him!"

Life, it seems, is not a problem to be solved. It's a mystery to be lived. We can't always avoid the fear, pain, and suffering that comes our way, but we can choose whether to listen to Jesus and enter the conversation that is God.

So, what about your decision? How are you going to pray for your friend and her father?

Pray for a miracle. That's what we really want. But don't stop there!

Pray for God to be with your friend, and her father, and all who care for them. They are going to need others to stand by their sides. But don't stop there!

Pray for your friend and her father to be transfigured.

Your friend will need to learn to see the glory of God in conversations that don't involve any memories and, in some cases, not even words, just the holding of hands.

She will have to learn to see God praying in her father by the radiance she sees on his face when she plays music that he knows and the sparkle in his eyes when he finds something unusually beautiful.

Learning to see the glory of God won't take away all the fear, pain, or suffering, but it will allow your friend to look through them and find meaning and purpose on the other side.

It will also give her the quiet confidence that, in the end, even after the disease has done its worst, life is changed, not ended.

Amen

For Further Reading:

Samuel Wells uses the framework of three prayers for a friend whose father has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's to explore being with God in his book titled *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (2015). We will be using this book in Old Fashioned Sunday School during the Fall of this year to explore this topic further.

Martin Smith explores the metaphor of God as a conversation in his book titled *The Word is Very Near You: A Guide to Praying with Scripture* (1989). This is one of the best books on prayer that I have ever read.

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip*. All rights reserved.