

In an interview, singer and songwriter Garth Brooks said for the first two years of his marriage, he occasionally thought about his high school sweetheart and wondered if maybe he should have married her instead of his wife. He remembered fervently praying for his sweetheart to love him as much as he loved her, but despite thinking their relationship was perfect, things didn't work out. According to Brooks, a chance meeting with his high school sweetheart at a homecoming football game years later opened his eyes to the gift unanswered prayers can be. In the lyrics of the song inspired by this meeting called *Unanswered Prayers*, the conversation between the two former lovers was described as awkward. They had changed so much they could hardly remember their past relationship. Brooks realized his memories of the relationship were idealized and that his love for his wife is a different kind of love, the kind you build a marriage on. The song is summed up with the line that describes what Garth Brooks learned about prayer, "Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers."

When we pray, like Garth Brooks, we have no way of knowing how our lives will go, what choices we will make a week from now let alone a year from now, how we will handle challenges or loss or joys. Sometimes there is a reason our prayers are not answered, or in the example of Garth Brooks' song the answer is 'no'. Ultimately unanswered prayers are a reminder that God is God, and we are not.

Which might be what is going on in today's Gospel lesson where two of Jesus' disciples, two brothers, approached him in a side conversation and stated their desire. James and John were part of what scholars and commentators refer to as Jesus' "inner circle". Sometimes Jesus would leave crowds behind to go heal someone or do some other miracle, but he would take a few of his disciples with him. Usually that was James, John, and Peter. That means those disciples had seen firsthand what the rest of them only got to hear about: things like the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead and the transfiguration of Jesus on a mountain top. Their experience of Jesus was a little more intense than that of the other disciples.

We don't know why Jesus separated those three from the others. Maybe he wanted a small group to witness his miracles so they could describe or explain them to the others to help them figure out who Jesus is. Maybe he understood not every individual can process events the same way and chose people he

thought would understand what his miracles were pointing to. Like I said, we don't know Jesus' logic. But what today's side conversation might reveal is that whatever Jesus' intention was, it probably was different than what James and John saw.

After witnessing things they could not explain, it appears they did not see the servanthood love of God in action repairing the breach between humanity and God. Instead, it seems they saw power and hierarchy and wanted to secure their place as close to the top as possible.

It would be easy to fault the brothers for this request. Lots of essays and commentaries and sermons have. Instead, if we are honest, even though it is not as comfortable as demonizing them for their behavior, we might recognize it is behavior we can relate to.

It seems to me; many scholars and commentators and preachers don't take into consideration all that James and John have gone through in such a short period of time. They chose to leave their father and his fishing business to follow Jesus. This is not a choice many parents or friends or partners would support. There was no job security, no steady paycheck, no housing provided. There was none of the stuff of privilege or status if they followed Jesus. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, they were separated from their community and family. Maybe sometimes they felt the grief of that separation.

In addition to that dramatic change to their lives, they saw Jesus had a power they didn't understand: the power to restore wholeness to the ill, family and community to the estranged, even life to the dead. They saw crowds fed from a few bits of bread and fish. They witnessed Jesus' meeting with Moses and Elijah in the strangest in person conference ever. They saw Jesus walk on water and stop a raging storm simply by telling it to be still.

All of this is evidence of who Jesus is and the change he was bringing into the world. But we humans have a love hate relationship with change. We sometimes say we want it; we long for it and pray for it. However, when the change actually happens, most often there is an adjustment period where we are uncomfortable because don't always know what to do. Old habits or patterns of behavior won't work like they used to, just ask parents of a new baby or child about that, or someone who got a new job in a different part of the country.

We humans tend to respond to the stress caused by change, especially multiple changes by hoping and praying the world really hasn't changed, even if it was the change we prayed for. Think of the story of the Israelites leaving slavery of Pharaoh in Egypt. As soon as the excitement of the whole Red Sea event was over, they started to whine and complain about everything from the food to the

leadership. They began to remember slavery as being a way to get free housing and food and longed to return. Freedom was the change they prayed for, but it was just too uncomfortable, and they didn't know how to live as free people.

However, once change happens, there is no going back. Like the Red Sea. Like Jesus walking on water. And the resurrection. Once Jesus rose from the dead all that stuff of hierarchy and prestige, while it is still around and might still be what we are comfortable with, it is not the glory of God in Christ and not how Christians are to order our lives.

The glory of Jesus is not his miracles. The glory of Jesus is in what so many find too uncomfortable to look at: the cross. When Jesus was crucified, he forever eradicated the notion that God was going to participate in the power structures, economics, and politics we human beings created to manage the world. God is not like that. In the cross we see God is not afraid to suffer with that which God created because God loves what God created. God loves you. God is a part of the world, not separate from it.

This is why Jesus told James and John in the Gospel that one day they would indeed drink from the same cup and be baptized in his baptism. For they will suffer, and they will die proclaiming the Gospel. But as to who will be on his left and right, those are not places of prestige like a first officer or cannon to the ordinary, like they might have imagined. When Jesus was crowned in his glory, on his right and on his left were two criminals who were crucified that same Good Friday.

This means the purpose of our faith is not to force the crucifixion of Jesus into any human system of self help or consumerism. The crucifixion wasn't a setback Jesus went through and came out all right in the end. It wasn't like an injury he bounced back from and then went on as if nothing had happened. The resurrection didn't fix a problem by buying supplements at a drug store or ordering something from Amazon Prime. The resurrection is not restoring life to the way it was before the crucifixion. The resurrection is the beginning of a new life, one with Christ in the middle of it, one that turns everything we understand as "normal" upside down and inside out. One that sounds good but can be uncomfortable and challenging to live into. Because it can be difficult to figure out what to do, how to live resurrection life, especially when we don't fully understand it.

However every once in a while, we might encounter someone who gives us an idea of what it can look like. In Tracy Chevalier's 2019 novel *A Single Thread* she introduces her readers to a character named Miss Pesel, who is based on a woman who lived in England in the 1930's who among many other achievements,

created and oversaw guilds of women who made embroidered cushions for cathedrals. When introducing Louisa Pesel, Chevalier wrote she was the kind of leader who was comfortable in her authority, and she didn't put others down to make herself feel like a leader. Throughout the novel we see what the author meant as her character nurtures and encourages and challenges other women to learn an art that you can still see if you visit places like Winchester Cathedral. Miss Pesel didn't need to compete for power, she shared it and in so doing together with many other women, created lasting beauty.

But we're probably getting ahead of ourselves. James and John will get there eventually, but they weren't ready for such a life when they pulled Jesus aside and stated their desire to be his first and second in command. While not literally a prayer, their conversation can look like some prayers. The kind that petitions God for things that perhaps we either aren't ready for or aren't quite in line with resurrection life. The kind of prayers that might be more about the fear and frustration that comes with changes that might be what we wanted but don't know how to live into. Prayers that express our tendency to double down on things we don't realize give us comfort like prestige and hierarchy simply because we are familiar with them.

When that happens, like with James and John in today's Gospel, or Garth Brooks back in his high school days, perhaps we might have a more compassionate understanding as to why the answer to some prayers is 'no'. Such unanswered prayers are not evidence of a God who doesn't care. Nor are they proof that God doesn't exist. Instead, they are God with us in times of change or suffering, reminding us God's ways are not to partner with those in power. God walks with and lifts up the humble.

Today we find ourselves living in the midst of multiple changes. I witness evidence of fatigue, frustration, and a desire to go back the way things were before, whatever that time is ideally remembered to be. It can be difficult to have compassion when we feel this way. It is difficult to envision how to adapt our ministries and our lives. It is difficult to have patience when we see programs that used to be effective and aren't anymore and we don't have a simple, easy to follow template to fix this problem. It all can feel like just too much work. And like Garth Brooks, like James and John, we might pray for things that are in line with systems we know to be unjust or wrong, but we go to them because they have the comfort of familiarity. That is also why we might start scapegoating and blaming certain parts of the population for our struggles because of what whoever "they" are did or didn't do.

But as comforting as these mindsets are, they aren't the stuff of resurrection life that calls us to live differently, to serve God. Perhaps all the unanswered prayers of our lives are in reality guiding us gently toward resurrection life. Perhaps all our unanswered prayers are bringing God's Kingdom where things like inequality become a memory closer to us all. Perhaps the song has it right, "Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers."