

What's next? Living with not knowing, yet trusting that God knows.

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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A university exam was finishing up, the professor came into the room to give final instructions. She told the students that they would need to sign a form that declared they had not used any outside sources while completing the exams. One by one the students handed in their exams and completed forms as they left the hall. But one student lingered. They finally came to the professor, visibly struggling with a dilemma.

The student finally said, "I don't know whether or not to sign this. You see, I prayed to God before coming into this exam, and prayed a lot while writing it. So, what should I do?"

The prof skimmed his exam quickly, page by page, then said, "Sign it. You don't have to worry, God didn't answer your prayers."

That scenario takes me back a few years to more than a few exams that I went into, where everything felt on-the-line and I could not at all say that I knew how I would do. Sometimes we just don't know. Like now, here in the midst of what seems constant transition. Planning anything, whether events at a church or a trip to visit loved ones, we cannot look any further ahead than a month or two.

Since the Enlightenment period we have been trained to want to control, to predict, to manage. To a certain extent, medical science has brought miraculous new tools to extend life expectancy in the privileged world, even as 2/3 of our world do not have access to many medical miracles. This is a false sense of control, and predictability, though, isn't it? I mean, loved ones still die too young – whether it was a tragic accident or a pernicious virus or disease.

Simply put, there are things beyond our control. We can pretend to know, but deep down there are moments when we feel utterly helpless. Can you relate to that experience? Anne Lamott offers a wonderful commentary on faith, she says:

The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.¹

For the disciples in Mark's Gospel story today, there was definitely a control issue going on. Evidently some person is going around healing in Jesus' name, and there is concern among Jesus' media consultants, his disciples, that they are losing control of the healing narrative. Jesus, in response, seems rather cavalier about the whole thing. This is a good thing; God's work is beyond human managing.

Switching to today's paraphrase of the book of James, these are the parting words of his book:

Are any among you suffering? ...pray.

Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

Are any among you sick? ...call for the elders ... [to come and] ...pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.²

¹ *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*. Anne Lamott. © 2006, Riverhead Trade.

² James chapter 5, verses 13, 14 New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Interacting regularly for awhile with practicing Muslims, I heard a short phrase very regularly, “Insh’Allah” – meaning, God willing. A typical conversation might come to a close with good-byes, the usual parting words like, “We hope to see you soon,” to which the Muslim friend will inevitably respond, “Insh’Allah”, the implication being that God has the future in hand, not us. We trust God with the future. ³

We have that same sense at the core of Christian faith, more often in my childhood and more Conservative Christian circles than now modern circles would I hear the qualifier, “God willing.”

Even with the brilliance of modern technology, medicine, astronomy, there are many things we don’t yet, and likely will not in my lifetime truly understand. How do you feel about uncertainty in your life, especially with big things like health, your finances, the state of the world?

Medicine can mitigate pain and add quality of life for many of us facing diseases and viruses that would have been untreatable decades ago.

I heard an artist and musician interviewed on CBC over this past week describing the frustration he felt, afflicted with Lyme Disease. After a long battery of tests were finished, he sat down for the consult with his doctor.

Patient: “Doctor, what is it?”

Doctor: “I just don’t know.”

The musician said that at that moment he wanted to reach over and kiss the doctor, for having the courage to say, “I don’t know.” Too many times science compels us to fill in the not knowing with gibberish. Experts don’t like to feel out of control.

James, though, speaking from his ancient context, suggests that we are not completely helpless. Does that seem naïve? Do his words lack credibility because the science of his time was very different from modern medicine?

James declares that whether we are celebrating or suffering, we must pray. Prayer matters. He even gives suggestions about how this should work – ideally in community. Now, I don’t know about you, but some of my most healing moments have been when another person has lavished me with care and prayer. The image of a sick person, a person facing addiction, or a person who has faced an enormous loss, calling members of their community of faith for support and prayer. That touches me. Perhaps they bring along a casserole, or a prayer shawl, or oil to gently anoint this hurting child of God.

Does prayer make a difference? I would bet that for that suffering person surrounded by the care of faithful, prayerful friends, they would say an emphatic yes. Perhaps we might reclaim this ancient practice, to gather – of course observing COVID protocols – but to share our pain, our joys, our griefs and victories with one another, punctuating those moments with prayer – together praying, praying alone. But praying especially in those times of not knowing, trusting that in spite of our doubts and fears, we are not alone. Amen.

³For one discussion of context, visit <https://www.learnreligions.com/islamic-phrases-inshaallah-2004286>