

You Got What You Prayed For, So What's the Problem?

We're all here, presumably, because we are Christians, and as Christians, we generally share certain basic beliefs. We believe in God. We believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and we believe in the Holy Spirit. There are also a number of other things we share in common, including prayer – we pray.

We pray quite a bit during the worship service. We pray at the start of worship, we lift up joys and concerns in prayer, we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray when we dedicate the offering, we pray at the end of the service – you get the idea. We pray a lot. And that's just here at church. Some of us – probably most of us – pray at other times, too. We pray about all sorts of things, as varied as the individuals that we are.

Let's say one of us is having a problem, or something like that. So, we're praying for a particular reason. We might ask God for help with something or someone, or we might ask for guidance and direction, or we might even ask for something really specific – a situation change – whatever it is – we pray and in this case, we're asking God for or about some specific thing or issue.

We've probably all done this at one time or another, and maybe often. When we receive the answer to our prayers, what do we do? Do we even recognize the answer at that time, or at all?

Here's something that could happen to anyone, and probably has happened more than we know.

Fred (I'll call him Fred for no particular reason – the names have been changed to protect the guilty) – Fred had been missing from church for over a month when he finally showed up again one Sunday morning. Following the service, the pastor ran into Fred at coffee hour and asked how he was doing. A while back, Fred had asked for prayers. He had been having trouble with his boss, and had asked the church to pray that the two of them might get along better, and that he be happier at work in general. As this concern had been raised up more than once, Fred was on the prayer list, and many people were praying for him. So, the pastor inquired of Fred how things were going.

“Huh”, snorted Fred, and he expounded: “I’ll tell you what happened. The last time I was here, it had been a particularly hard week at work. Things were getting worse, not better. I was praying for help, and I know the church had also been praying for me. I figured things would get better. I just needed to be patient and do my best. I had a good attitude about it. Just be a Christian, I said to myself. You can do that.” The pastor was listening intently. A couple of other people who knew Fred well had moved closer and were also listening to the unfolding saga.

Fred continued. “So, I go in Monday morning and the secretary says to me “John (John’s the boss), John wants to see you before you start.” Well, I didn’t think much of it – we often had little meetings in the morning, so I grabbed my coffee and went into John’s office, greeted him cheerfully, sat down and said what’s up? I noticed John was extremely nervous, fumbling with some pens and looking down.” “Fred”, says John after a rather long pause, “We’re going to have to make a change”. Fred, recounting his experience, was starting to get a little worked as he continued on. “Of course, you all know what that means. I got canned – fired. After all the work I’ve done for that place, they just blew me out the door. Great answer to a prayer!

One of the others who had joined the group said: “Wow! So what did you do?”. Fred went on: “Well, I needed a job and I needed one pronto. The company had given me 4 weeks severance pay and health care coverage for up to 6 months if I needed it, so I started looking. I figured I better grab something – anything - before the money ran out and the bills start piling up. I assembled my resume, posted it on monster.com, and called a couple of head hunters. I was feeling angry, discouraged and quite desperate. One of the head hunters called with a contract engineering position at a nearby company that matched my skills pretty well, so I took it. I figured something temporary was better than nothing at all.”

The pastor asked “So how’s it working out?” Fred replied: “Well, so far, so good. I guess I just got lucky. The people are nice, it’s close by, and as a contractor, the money is good. Anyway, I can pay the bills for now - but you’ve got to hear this.” Fred’s tone is indignant: “Some of those jokers from my old job want to get together for a few beers and a Sox game some night after work. They all know I was let go. What do they want to do, rub it in? I just tell them I’m too busy. I’m pretty sore at the whole bunch of them.”

One of the others in the group spoke up: “Say, didn’t you tell me a couple of times how those contract engineers have it made in the shade – good pay, varied work, new projects all the time?” Fred stopped. He looked puzzled for a moment and then started scratching the back of his head. “Hmmm” he said. “I guess that’s true, now that I think about it.”

At that moment, of course, Fred realized he had been wrong about the answer to his prayers. Fred’s getting let go from the job he disliked was part of his journey to a new and better opportunity. It felt terrible at the time – getting fired and all, but now, looking back, he could see it was the right thing at the right time. Fred also realized he had been wrong about his attitude towards his former work mates, including his old boss. They were all part of the process that brought Fred to where he was at that moment.

How often do we do what Fred did? How many of our prayers have been answered that we didn’t see or appreciate? Do we hold resentment towards people in our past who were part of what brought us to where we are now?

For myself, and I’m sure for most of us, there’s a chain of events that got us from where we were to where we are. For the majority of people, there were probably some really unpleasant, perhaps awful times along the way. If one were to look back over a lifetime or even over an extended period of time you might say “It could have been a lot better”. Well, maybe that’s true, but it also could have been a lot worse, perhaps a whole lot worse. Are there people in your past who were mean or who treated you badly? It happens to everybody. The important thing is to really reflect on the experiences and honestly discern as to whether you are stronger, smarter, better equipped, better off – whatever it is - because you went through whatever it was.

Does anyone remember that old Johnny Cash song “A Boy Named Sue”? It’s a song about a boy whose father named him Sue. Well, you can imagine a boy, growing up in the West with no money, father gone, and pretty much on his own would have a hard time – and an even harder time because his name was Sue. The song goes on “I grew up hard and I grew up mean, my fist got hard and my wits got keen” - he’s a pretty tough cookie. But he hated his father, and had vowed he was going to find him and kill him. One day he walks into a bar, and as the song goes “there at a table dealing stud, sat the dirty, mangy dog who named me Sue”. The boy’s blood ran cold. He

walked up to the table and says to his father “my name is Sue, how do you do? Now you’re going to die”.

Well, they have a big brawl and finally the boy prevails. He’s got his gun and he’s ready to pull the trigger, when the father slowly smiles and he says to the boy “Son, this world is rough and if a man’s going to make it he’s got to be tough, and I knew I wouldn’t be there to help you along. So I gave you that name and said goodbye. I knew you’d have to get tough or die, and it’s that name that helped to make you strong. Now you just fought one heck of a fight and I know you hate me and you’ve got the right to kill me now, and I wouldn’t blame you if you do. But you’ve got to thank me before I die, ‘cause I’m the dirty so-and-so who named you Sue”.

Of course, the boy lowers his gun, calls his father “pa”, and as the song goes “he came away with a different point of view”.

This sort of thing has probably happened to most of us. Obviously, not being a boy named sue, but having a hard time, maybe even for many years. It’s happened to me, that’s for sure. I look back, particularly on my childhood which was arguably difficult and sometimes crazy at times, and I realize that those experiences are what made me what I am today. I have all kinds of skills that I most likely would not have, had things been easier. I ended up doing pretty well after all. Could it have been easier? Well, probably. Better – well, that’s debatable.

If we are living a God-directed life, there may very well be – and in my experience, most likely will be – tough times along the way. But, just like the boy named Sue, those tough times will probably makes us better. We can go around with a lot of resentment towards situations or people we didn’t like, carrying this baggage with us year after year, but what good does it do? It wastes a lot of time and energy, and pollutes the present with junk from the past.

As Christians, our faith directs us to forgive those who stepped on our toes along the way, and to realize that it could have been much worse, and possibly not much better. Like the boss who really did Fred a favor by firing him, we have people like that in our lives. They did things that were awful, unforgivable, or just plain wrong, but if those things caused us, after some time, to move to a better place or a better life, we need to let the resentment go and be thankful to God for bringing us to a better place. It is hard to

forgive, and even harder to thank (even if silently) those who did us wrong at the time, but who actually helped us in the long run. Lots of times, the only thing that really seems to stay hurt is our pride, and that can get us into trouble.

We might be too proud to say I'm sorry, or thank you, or you were right, or I was wrong. We're often too proud to forgive, causing us to carry the burden of resentment with us and eating away at our joy. The Bible speaks out against pride in many places. Proverbs 16 verse 5 states: The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished. Pride is one of the so-called seven deadly sins, and is considered to be the original and most deadly sin, from which all other sins arise. As Christians, we need to guard against our pride, and enter into a state of love and forgiveness for those who "helped" us to where we are now.

So, we need to keep praying to God for guidance and direction, for forgiveness and humility, for discernment and wisdom and for answers to the puzzles in our lives. But always keep in mind that we may just get what we ask for. The question is: will we be ready for the answer when it comes. Amen.

This sermon was written by Stephen Cloutier of the Townsend Congregational Church, and was given on 22-Jul-2007.