

PRAYER: WE ASK

by Rev. Elaine Poproski

I want to begin this morning by talking about embedded beliefs. These are things we believe without even thinking about them. They are shaped by the assumptions we're surrounded by as we grow up. They're the things we absorb, usually from early teachings – though not necessarily, and often not, formalized teaching. We absorb these things as we experience life with our parents and other key adults and communities around us. They shape our understanding of the world and of our place in the world. They shape our understanding of things like relationships, education, and religion. Our embedded beliefs are those things we've learned and that have been reinforced by our environment. In particular, this morning, I'd like to talk about our embedded theology, by which I mean our embedded beliefs about God and about faith.

Our embedded theology primarily includes all those things we absorbed from our families and, for those of us who grew up this way, from our churches. We might describe it as our religious cultural heritage. It's the various presumptions and assumptions we hold, often without even knowing we hold them. For instance, if we grow up only seeing one kind of Christian leader – one gender, one colour of skin, one style of leadership – we assume that's what it means to be a Christian leader. Countless things shape our embedded theology. For sure, how our churches and parents talk about God is important, but so are the books we're read as young children, the behavioural expectations of us when in church, the way we're expected to dress for church, even the architecture and design of the place in which we gather for worship. All these things shape our theology – our understanding of who God is, how God acts, what God thinks of us...

I grew up going to a church in which there was always a long prayer time at some point before or after the sermon. I'm sure there were other moments of prayer, but this was the main one. Kind of like our Prayers of Thanksgiving and Concern. And because prayer wasn't something we practiced at home in my family, other than saying grace before meals, it was this long prayer in church that shaped my embedded beliefs about prayer and that contributed significantly to my embedded beliefs about God. Namely, this long Sunday prayer was always *about* God rather than *to* God. At least that's how I heard it growing up. Can you imagine how that weekly experience might have shaped my understanding of God? My assumptions about relationship with God? I was well into adulthood before I even knew I assumed God to be a removed, distant entity who loved me, sure, but who mostly presided way out there in the sky somewhere. I had no understanding of prayer as conversation with God. I had no expectation – it wasn't even something that occurred to me – that God spoke to people. Other than Bible people. I'd heard the stories. But they weren't the stories of the people I grew up surrounded by. At least they weren't stories I heard.

Unless you grew up in a home and community in which God – any kind of God – wasn't acknowledged at all – I believe we all have embedded theology. We all have assumptions and presumptions about the nature and character of God and about God's relationship to us. Can you think of any assumptions about God you grew up with? What's one embedded theological belief of which you are aware? Let's take a moment.

Pause to consider.

The first time I heard someone pray like they were talking to someone they knew, I was floored. It was such a foreign concept to me that anyone would pray that way. That was the moment I became aware of my embedded theology, particularly around prayer and the God to whom we pray.

Often we become aware of our embedded theology accidentally, like I did with that experience of prayer. Something happened that was different from what I knew. It created a kind of dissonance inside me. Something didn't fit. Something was wrong. I didn't immediately understand the source of that dissonance. It took some time reflecting to figure out what was going on. But I'm really glad for that experience, for that profoundly uncomfortable dissonance, and for the various people who helped me reflect on it and uncover my embedded theology. Because it's only when we become aware of our embedded theology that we can correct it – assuming it needs correcting. Not all our embedded theology needs correcting. But it's always helpful to uncover it so we can understand it and live into it in ways that are deliberative, intentional, and reproduceable.

A couple minutes ago I asked you to think about an embedded theological belief of which you are aware. How did you become aware of it? Maybe it was because you started talking to people who didn't assume the same things as you. Maybe it created a kind of dissonance in you. Maybe you had an experience that created dissonance in you.

When I've worked with students studying for ministry, one of the experiences that students often have as they're in field placements in ministry, is that they often experience a death or something significant that happens in the life of someone in their congregation. Often, that experience challenges some of their embedded theology. For instance, maybe about God's goodness or God's all-powerfulness, and then 'why weren't prayers answered?'

There's a whole lot of dissonance that happens. And what that does, is it reveals that there's something embedded deep in you that you need to pull out and uncover. Maybe the dissonance is as mild as reading or being taught something that challenged you. Or it might have been a profound experience that you couldn't make sense of because of your assumptions. More often than not, the thing that triggers that sense of dissonance happens by chance. Though I believe that if we've invited the Holy Spirit to live in us, then the Holy Spirit invites and even nurtures these moments of dissonance in us specifically so that we will grow in faith – in our relationship with God.

The thing is, we can learn to listen and look for signs of our embedded theology. We don't have to just stumble across it by accident. Our embedded theology shows up in lots of ways. I think one of the clearest ways our embedded theology shows itself is in the way we pray (or don't pray). It's in the words we use as we pray. It's in the ways we address God, the things we pray for, the various practices that surround our prayers...

When I pray, I almost always end with something like: "...in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Amen." I do this because at some point I became aware that my embedded theology was not actually trinitarian. Even though I believed the basic Christian tenet that God was Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I only ever prayed to God – by which I meant the Father. And as I reflected on that awareness, I realized I didn't really think of Jesus – the Son – as God. And I

didn't really think about the Holy Spirit at all. So I made the choice to intentionally include the entire Trinity in my prayers and was in that way able to reshape my embedded theology. That reshaping didn't happen overnight. It took time. Just like my embedded theology didn't embed itself overnight, but took time to develop.

One of the great things about living and practicing our faith in the context of community, is that others often hear our embedded theology much more clearly than we do, especially if their theology differs from ours. Proverbs 27:17 tells us, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." If we live and practice our faith in the context of that kind of community, in which we expect to be sharpened by each other, we will invite each other to help us become aware of our embedded theology. We will hear it in the way we pray, but also in the way we talk about prayer, about God, about the church, about all things faith related.

Right now, our province is embroiled in what seems to be an immovable, unresolvable conflict around rules of life in society during a pandemic. We have drastically different opinions about what's appropriate and what's not. We are fighting in a way we Canadians aren't usually seen to fight. And under all the fighting are embedded beliefs that many of us can't even articulate. These are beliefs about human rights, social responsibility, the trustworthiness of government,... all sorts of things. I wonder, if instead of fighting about vaccine requirements and lockdown mandates, we engaged in thoughtful dialogue about the values shaped by our embedded beliefs, we might have less yelling and screaming and swearing at each other, and might actually be able to find a way through this stand off.

I would argue that many (if not all) of the conflicts that we experience have to do with embedded beliefs of some kind. I would argue that often the fights that split churches or cause people to leave churches, have to do with embedded theology we aren't aware of, or we aren't willing to examine, but to which we hold tightly and uncompromisingly. One of the areas of conflict Walmer experienced in its not-too-distant past, was around prayer for healing. Whether or not we should pray for healing, how we pray for healing, how long we persist in praying for healing, what happens in us if our prayers for healing don't result in healing... all these things say something about our embedded theology. And if we recognize that, and choose to reflect on that embedded theology, we may not just avoid conflict, but actually resolve conflict. Especially if we do that uncovering and reflecting together.

That's the thing, it's not enough to just be aware of our embedded theology. We need to uncover it, expose it to the light of day, as it were, and examine it to determine if it's true or if it needs to be adjusted. How does it measure up against the witness of Scripture? How do other Christians, who've deliberately thought about and studied it understand it? These might be Christians we know, or Christian authors and teachers we've never met; they might be historical or current; they may be represented in Christian tradition, or in the liturgy and music of the Church. All this reflecting has a name. We call it theological reflection. It's what we do with the embedded theology we uncover, either by accident, because of some experience of dissonance, or because we're deliberately paying attention to the ways we think and talk about God and faith.

This whole area of embedded theology and theological reflection is essential in our conversation about prayer. It's essential in all the conversations we've been having lately. I know when I began this series and talked about Friendship with God, some of us had a visceral reaction

against the whole idea of being friends with God. That reaction suggests embedded theology that needs to be uncovered and examined. It might have to do with your concept of God – Is he too big and unknowable to truly be friends with? Does it undermine his sovereignty or his holiness to talk about friendship with God? Maybe the reaction against the idea of friendship with God has less to do with God and more to do with us. Maybe it's about our worthiness for friendship with God. Maybe it's about our understanding of friendship itself. Whatever it is, something causes the visceral reaction, and that something is most likely embedded theology.

Similarly, when I suggested in the first sermon of this series, that God likes us. Some of us reacted very strongly against that idea. Why? Again, I'd suggest there is embedded theology at play.

And when I talk about listening to God. Some of us think I'm bonkers. That's because there is embedded theology in which there is no room for a God who engages in conversation with regular people like us.

I never want to suggest that anything I say, whether in a sermon or in casual conversation, can't be challenged. I never want to suggest that you can't disagree with me. We are all on this journey together. That being said, I also want us to examine why we disagree. I think, more often than not, there is some kind of embedded theology at play. And it's only as we uncover that embedded theology, allowing ourselves to examine it and reflect on it, ideally with others, that we all reach a better understanding of God and ourselves, and all things faith related.

We are talking these days about the Spiritual Discipline of Prayer. This is a huge topic. We've spent a couple weeks talking about listening to God. This week we're transitioning to talking to God – particularly to praying for people and things. We call this kind of prayer Intercession or Petition. And we're going to talk about it for at least a few weeks. Because it's a complicated, potentially difficult topic. Because it plays host to some of our most fundamental embedded theology.

When our Tuesday small group started meeting in mid-January, one of the first things we started talking about was prayer. It's the format of this group that I don't specifically determine the topic of discussion, beyond the previous Sunday's sermon and scripture being the jumping off point for the discussion. The group had a lot to say about friendship with God and various related topics, but something that's come up over and over again is the topic of prayer. In particular, we've wrestled with the question of whether or not we, through prayer, can influence God. Is it possible to change God's mind? Are God's actions in part or completely in response to our prayers? Why do we pray at all? Do we pray simply because Jesus told us to pray? Do we pray because our prayers make a difference? I hope you can see by all these questions, how complicated the whole conversation about prayer – particularly intercessory or petitionary prayer – can be. That's because these questions reflect embedded theology. And this embedded theology isn't just about topics we may or may not find interesting. It is, in a lot of ways, central to our faith – to the very foundations of our understanding of God and thus how we interact with God and, perhaps even more importantly, how he interacts with us.

Think about this: one of the central tenets of Christianity is the sovereignty of God. By this we mean that God is in charge. When we call Jesus King of kings and Lord of lords, we're saying

that God is sovereign. He's the ruler to whom everyone must listen. It can be a hard concept for us because we don't have kings and queens like this in our world. Sure, there's Queen Elizabeth, but probably most of us just see her as a kind of figurehead. And we probably don't think of God that way. Though it might be interesting to examine our embedded beliefs about royalty and how those beliefs shape our understanding of God. We have democratically elected leaders; how does that influence our thinking about the sovereignty of God? We are also aware of various dictators around the world – perhaps that's a concept that more closely aligns with the way we understand kings and queens? If so, how does that impact our thinking about the sovereignty of God? It's not unheard of for God to be described as a kind of benevolent dictator. I expect that if we dig into our embedded theology, more than one of us will discover that this is how we understand God. And if that's our embedded theology, how does that impact the way we pray? How does it impact even whether we pray?

There's another piece of this thing we need to examine, that's deeply intertwined with the sovereignty piece. That's the place of people in relation to God and creation. I've been reading an author who suggests that the whole way God set up the world in the beginning was by naming men and women as steward of everything he'd created. God made Adam and Eve, and all those who follow, managers of the world he'd created. And as managers or stewards of the world, men and women have authority over the world. This author suggests that what happened when Satan entered the Garden, was that Adam and Eve traded their authority for the fruit of the forbidden tree. And ever since then, Satan has had authority that should have been ours. And it's only through Jesus that Satan's authority was finally removed. But our authority was not removed. Instead, it was returned to us through Jesus. And that's why, when we pray in the name of Jesus, there is power in our prayers to shape things and change things. Because God has chosen to work in the world through us and to limit his own work in the world to that which he does in partnership with us.¹

I fully expect that sentence to bring something up inside you. Again, that sentence: God has chosen to work in the world through us and to limit his own work in the world to that which he does in partnership with us.

What are you feeling as you listen to that explanation? What are you feeling as I say that God has chosen to work in the world through us and has thus limited his own work in the world to that which he does in partnership with us. This is a big idea. I know for me, when I first read this idea, I had an internal reaction that I knew was because it was poking at my embedded theology. And because it was poking at my embedded theology, I needed to figure out what that embedded theology was and what to do with it. So I fully expect this idea might also be poking at your embedded theology. It might be a disturbing idea to you. It might be uncomfortable. So I want to invite you to take a bit of time right now to reflect. Here's the summary of the idea again:

God has chosen to work in the world through us and God has chosen to limit his own work in the world to that which he does in partnership with us.

Take a moment or two right now to note how does that statement make you feel, and why it makes you feel that way?

Pause for some quiet reflection.

This week, write out a prayer for someone or something. Then have a look at what you've written. Can you identify any embedded theology? In the way you've addressed God, in the way you've asked for something, in whatever it is you've chosen to pray for? Maybe you don't pray. Then take some time to reflect on why that is. The goal this week is to begin to uncover some of our embedded theology, particularly as it reveals itself through prayer, and to begin to reflect on whether or not that embedded theology accurately reflects who God is and who we are in relation to God.

¹ This comes from Dutch Sheets. *Intercessory Prayer: How God Can Use Your Prayers to Move Heaven and Earth*. (Bloomington, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 23-35.