



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“5. PERSISTENT PRAYER”

Scripture Lesson: Luke 11:1-8; 18:1-8

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, August 3, 2008.

Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary in California has a story about an American tourist in Jerusalem who sees a devout Orthodox Jew praying at the Western Wall, more commonly known as the Wailing Wall. The man rocks back and forth with closed eyes, beating upon his breast, raising his hands and crying out aloud. When he has finished, the tourist inquires of him, “What do you pray for?” Not unlike Barack Obama, whose recent prayer at the wall was intercepted and publicized in an act of profane impropriety, the Jew at the wall said he prayed for the health of his family, for righteousness and peace.

“Are these prayers effective,” asked the tourist. And the devout Jew replied, “It’s like talking to a wall!”

Well, sometimes it does seem that our prayers may go no farther than the walls and no higher than the ceiling. We pray for health and the biopsy comes back positive. We pray for the safety of our children and they fall into patterns of abuse and addiction. We pray for peace and religious fanatics destroy the innocent and create chaos. We pray for justice and the guilty go free the victims are ignored.

As children of the Enlightenment, living in a scientific and material age, we naturally question the value and the efficacy of prayer. We look for clear evidence & proof that it is effective, but it seems on an occasion a pointless monologue and, not surprisingly, people do cease praying in their disappointment. Even the great spiritual masters who teach us so much about prayer confess themselves to going through long dry spells when God seems silent or absent.

Among all my notes on this topic of prayer compiled in recent months, I wrote down a saying whose source escapes me. “Prayer may be the one Christian discipline most universally applauded and ignored. This shows our confusion and ambivalence.” Whoever said that is on target, I think. More of us praise the discipline of prayer than actually practice it. And the chief reason our practice falls short is because we are not fully convinced that our prayers make any difference.

But the Bible is clear that prayer does make a difference. “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” writes the apostle James. Well then, a person may conclude, I must not be very righteous because my prayers seem neither effective nor powerful. And if prayer is only effective for the holy and the pious, neither of which is used to describe me, then prayer serves me no purpose. But the scriptures are clear that God answers the prayers of all manner of people, sinners and skeptics alike. So, what are we to conclude?

How might our prayers become more effective. That is the key question given our periodic or continuing struggle. Jesus gives us some profound wisdom and divine insight on this matter. In our last session we learned that we are to pray with expectation, confident that God is capable of doing

any and all things but also confident that God will always do what is in our best interest and what is consistent with God's good purposes, whether we see his plan or not. So we pray confident that God can do what we ask and may yet do what we ask if our petitions serve his purposes and work for the good of his children.

This morning I want to emphasize a second aspect of our Lord's teaching on prayer. Our prayer should not only be expectant but also be persistent. The apostle Paul affirms this as well when he writes to the Colossians and charges them in Colossians 4:2: "Be persistent in prayer." Jesus was teaching persistence long before Paul picked up this theme.

The two parables of Jesus we heard this morning from Luke's gospel are both commending persistence in prayer. They may seem somewhat strange to us but only because they come from a different time and culture. In Luke 11 Jesus tells of a man who knocks on his neighbor's door at midnight asking if he can borrow some bread. You and I would probably call 911 if someone came knocking on our door at midnight. But this was part of the requirement of hospitality in the ancient world. A traveler had stopped to visit, we are told, and the man seeking bread from his neighbor was obligated to feed and care for him. But his cupboard was bare. At first the neighbor resists the request. After all, it is late at night; everything is locked up and his kids are in bed. Nonetheless, Jesus points out that even though this man balks at the request for bread from his neighbor and friend, he winds up helping his neighbor because of the man's dogged persistence. The man refused to take no for an answer.

The point here is not that if we hound God enough he might just give in. No, Jesus is trying to reassure his disciples that God is anxious to hear and answer their prayers. The point is that if a grouchy neighbor awakened from sleep in the middle of the night will eventually respond to an urgent request for bread, **how much more** will a loving and concerned God respond to our pleas. The point is not that God is like the bothered neighbor but rather that God is dramatically different from the begrudging neighbor. So pray boldly. Pray persistently. Don't give up or think that no one is listening or that no one cares.

Likewise, in the second parable we are to make a contrast between our heavenly father and the unjust judge in our Lord's story. Luke even offers the interpretation before he reports the parable. Verse 11 says: "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." In this story we meet a bad judge, a judge who neither feared God nor had any respect for people. A poor widow comes to him seeking justice. Widows, of course, were among the most vulnerable and powerless in that ancient world for without a husband a woman had no status, no security, and no rights to speak of. Widows naturally played a prominent roll in Jesus' ministry of compassion.

At any rate, the widow's only hope for justice is this scoundrel of a judge who is being bothered and warned down by her incessant cries for help. Finally the judge relents and not because he wants to mind you, but because this women is so relentless in her pursuit. Basically the judge just wants to get rid of the women.

Is God to be compared then to an unjust judge, stubborn and without compassion? Are we to keep nagging God until we wear him down and he finally does what is right? Absolutely not! We are intended to note the contrast and not the similarity between the judge and our God. If a dishonest, heartless judge would yield in time to the persistence of a widow, **how much more** responsive will our God be to our persistent cries for help or for justice?

Ah yes, you say, but sometimes God does indeed seem to be delayed in his response to our prayers. True enough, but what may seem to us a slow response of even a no response may simply

be God responding in a way we could never imagine or even ask. God is not ignoring us or putting us off but using even our limited and narrow requests to serve a larger good and a better purpose than we can conceive.

I am reminded of that old prayer with which you may be familiar, one attributed to a confederate soldier and found sometime after the war:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve. I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health that I might do greater things. I was given infirmity, that I might do better things. I asked for riches, that I might be happy. I was given poverty, that I might be wise. I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men. I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things, that I might really enjoy life. I was given life, that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing I asked for, but everything I had hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am among all men most richly blessed. Amen.

We may not understand why but Jesus tells us to persist in our praying. It is not because God wants us to beg or to nag. It is not because God is forgetful or distracted and needs reminding. But in thinking of reasons behind the wisdom and the virtue of persistence, several benefits came to my mind. These are not exhaustive to be sure and you are free to add your own insights but it seems to me from my study, from my reflection and from my personal experience, that persistence in praying does at least five things:

1. Persistence reveals our sincerity to God. How genuine are our prayers, how deep are our concerns if they are not prominent in our conversations with God?

2. Persistence deepens our faith in God. When we continue to trust in God and believe in God despite our disappointments we find our faith growing. It requires no faith, after all, to believe in the things we see and to believe in the things we can prove. But faith acted on grows and matures and satisfies the soul.

3. Persistence in praying underscores our need for God. When we continue to pray for the things uppermost in our hearts and minds we are reminded daily that we are dependent creatures with limits and liabilities and apart from God we are helpless in the things that ultimately matter.

4. Persistence strengthens our bond with God. Persistent prayer keeps us in relationship with the one whose love for us is unconditional and unassailable.

5. Lastly, our persistence in prayer reminds us of our continuing work with God. I will expand on this idea of prayer as partnership next week, but suffice it to say at this juncture that our persistent prayers remind us daily of those things for which we should be working as well as praying. After all, we dare not ask God for things that we are unwilling to work toward and sacrifice for. Prayer is no escape from work nor an avoidance of our own responsibilities and duties. To ask God for health while we continue to abuse our bodies and exercise little personal restraint is disingenuous, at best. To pray for peace in the world while we continue to harbor grudges against our neighbors is offensive to God and indicative of our own corruption. To pray for the poor while we continue to live in extravagance and luxury with selfish disregard of others is not just disingenuous but diabolical. If we pray for the church's effectiveness and for the spread of the gospel but come to church only when it convenient and contribute only what doesn't interfere with our preferred

lifestyle, then we may be fooling ourselves but we are most assuredly not fooling God. You see, God not only hears the words we speak when we pray but God listens to our hearts and reads our minds and watches our actions. This is how God measures the substance of our prayers.

So if you struggle with prayer as many of God's children have and still do, remember to pray with expectation first and secondly remember to pray persistently for this is the Lord's will. And what is more, our persistent praying reveals our sincerity to God, deepens our faith in God, underscores our need for God, strengthens our bond with God, and reminds us of our continuing work with God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

PRAYERS

Gracious and eternal God, we offer to you this day our fervent praise, our heart-felt adoration as we enter this house of prayer. We come at your invitation, undeserving though we are. We come seeking the presence and power of your Holy Spirit to touch those places of need in our lives and in the lives of others. Grant, O God, that because we meet together in worship this day life will grow

Greater for some who have contempt for it,
Simple for some who are confused by it,
Happier for some who are tasting the bitterness of it,
Safer for some who are feeling the peril of it,
More friendly for some who are feeling the loneliness of it,
Serenely for some worried by the concerns of it,
and holier for some who seem to have lost life's dignity, its beauty, & its meaning.

This is the quest of our worship and this is the substance of our prayer offered in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer:

Eternal God, our Lord, we thank you this day for the privilege of prayer and for the opportunity for a season of prayer even here in worship. And we would begin, O God, by asking as did your disciples so long ago that you would teach us how to pray. Teach us to move beyond our bowed heads and our closed eyes so that we may really offer ourselves to you in prayer. Teach us how to quiet our minds so that we may hear you within the cries of our own hearts.

Teach us how to give thanks, Lord. Help us to move beyond our false sense of self-sufficiency and pride, and simply to be grateful for all that we have that we neither earned nor deserved. And, Lord, if we find nothing for which to be grateful, and if we do not feel like giving thanks to get today, then forgive our arrogance and our shortsightedness.

Teach us, Lord, how to pray for others. Give us enough faith to commend to you those who were sick, those who are lonely, those who are afraid, those who are in sorrow, those who are dying even as they live. And if we have no one for whom to pray or to care about, and if we do not see the need of the child whose only playground is a city street filled with glass, or the family in the Middle East whose home has been burned to the ground, or the mother in Africa who must watch her child starve to death --- if we can pray for them then, Lord, have mercy upon us.

Teach us, Lord, to pray for ourselves aright. Help us to see ourselves in comparison to the life of your son, Jesus, and so to realize and discover our genuine needs. And teach us continually that real prayers are not only a matter of the words we speak but they are the thoughts, the affections, and the actions of our lives.

Lord, this morning we would have to confess that for many of us here today there is very little exciting about the month of August. There are no national holidays such as in July or September. There are no religious festivals such as Christmas or Easter. There aren't even any family days such as Mother's Day or Father's Day. Rather, this is a month of hot afternoons and oppressive humidity, of forgotten baseball teams fall out of contention, of dying enthusiasm for lawns and gardens. And

yet, here in worship we remember that every day is a gift from you and that there is a time to relax as well as to work, so that we recognize the cycle of the seasons as a part of you divine creation.

Therefore, help us O Lord to use our time well, even in these dog days of August. When we have time to travel, grant us safety on the highways. When we have time to sit leisurely and read a book, grant us a sense of rest without a sense of guilt. When we have time to be together as families then grant that we may really be together with one another rather than simply occupying space in the same room. When we are at work, grant that we do not excuse our irritability because of the heat. When we are on vacation, grant that we might be refreshed in body and spirit. And then, Lord, we can thank you even on these hot August days and say with meaning on these days as well as others that “This is the day which the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.”

(Lord’s Prayer)