

"A GOD TO PRAY TO"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
March 4, 1988

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INTRODUCTION

Whenever I sing that hymn I'm reminded of the time that a preacher announced to his congregation of many years that he had accepted a new assignment, a new Church. He said to them,

"Our dear friend, Jesus, who called me to be your pastor so many years ago has now called me to be the shepherd of another flock. Our friend, Jesus, would have me do this."

Whereupon one dear brother in the congregation rose to his feet and with tears in his eyes suggested that they all stand and sing, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus". Words from the hymn are the text of today's sermon. Yes, "take it to the Lord in prayer". Take the card that's in the bulletin along with you.

DEVELOPMENT

The sermons on the Sunday mornings in Lent this year are concerned with the resources of our inner life. Today's sermon - the third in the series - has to do with Jesus, prayer, God and ourselves.

One thing we know about Jesus beyond any shadow of doubt is that He prayed. The Gospel record makes this unmistakably clear.

At the beginning of His ministry when crowds followed Him wherever He went, it is written that after He healed many of their infirmities, He withdrew Himself into the wilderness and prayed. Later on in His ministry when the forces of the opposition were making themselves felt and He could feel the growing danger of their threatening power, it is written that He went to a lonely place...a quiet place and spent the night in prayer.

And finally on the last night of His life - the darkest night of all - He went into the Garden of Gethsemane, and it is written that He prayed, "Father, take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done."

We begin with the obvious fact that Jesus prayed.

RECAPITULATION

We know that in the crisis hours of His life that He had certain resources that He called into play.

First, as we saw two Sundays ago, He had a Book to go by - the accumulated wisdom of His people through which the voice of God spoke to Him with compelling and decisive authority. And second, from the time together last Sunday, we know He also had a few close, intimate friends to whom He could turn, with whom He could be Himself and pour out His inner feelings. He was sure of their loyalty, their trust, their support.

Third, we also know that in addition to those resources and surpassing them all, He had a God to whom He could turn and with whom He spent many rich and meaningful moments in prayer. I believe that of all the resources of His inner life, this was undoubtedly the greatest! His life of prayer was extraordinary.

WHAT ABOUT PRAYER AND OURSELVES

What about prayer and ourselves? I think if you and I were to talk to each other on the deeper levels of life, I'm fairly certain that somewhere in our con-

versation something like this might be expressed:

"I wish....I wish that prayer were more meaningful to me than it is. I often feel a 'tug' in that direction.... a need for it. But I don't seem to have much luck with it. I guess I'm negligent of cultivating or developing any kind of a real life of prayer....the kind that makes a difference."

I think I know some of you fairly well, and I know that prayer does mean a great deal to you. You have this inner resource. But the majority of us, I would suspect, do not have it like we ought to have it. And none of us has it to the degree that we would like to have it.

WHAT PRAYER IS Let's dig into this by thinking about prayer in its broad and general nature, before we consider it in its more specific expression.

When a person prays, he is essentially responding to the presence of God. When a person, for instance, comes into a room you respond to his or her presence. How? For one thing, you do not simply sit there and do nothing. You might rise out of respect for that person or you might greet him one way or another, perhaps a handshake or an embrace, or even a hug.

And the chances are that you would go on from there and ask him about himself...what he has been doing, how he is, how his day is going, how his family is, or where he's from. You would listen to him as he tells you about his life. You would listen thoughtfully and carefully. And then if he is the kind of person I have assumed he is, he would in turn begin to ask you about yourself. I think in time you would respond by telling him about the dark days of your life as well as the bright ones, about the pains and problems of your life, and hopefully the good things...the successes that have come your way. As you tell him, he would listen. Gradually you would come to where you might ask him for something, or tell him about the things you need.

RESPONDING TO GOD'S PRESENCE Now, I'm hopeful you can see where this is leading...it's rather simple and basic.

If God is present here and there and everywhere, but especially in certain places where His spirit or His presence are more easily felt by people, you respond to His presence.

You do something. You may stand up. Or, in the case of God, you are more likely to bow your head or kneel, because you realize that you are in the presence of the Creator of all life - the very Ground of our existence - the power from Whom all life is derived. You bow your head. You kneel. You greet Him. You may quietly say something which indicates your gladness...something which expresses in words what you yourself feel or think about Him.

Then you listen to Him as He tells you about Himself. He shares His plans for the universe, what He has done...plans to do and what's you to do.

And then you tell Him about yourself...about the things that are weighing heavily on your mind...the questions that perplex you...the responsibilities you

carry...the decisions that confront you...the temptations that threaten to undo you. Before you leave Him, you may ask Him for the things you feel you need. And this is so natural...the most natural thing in the world for a person to do, so that a person praying is a person in the presence of someone other than himself, greater than himself, and that Someone is "the one in whom he lives, moves and has his very being."

MAN'S NEED FOR GOD

And this, too, and this forms the second pillar or support for this sermon on prayer.

Prayer is also an indication of man's need for God. And that need - and this is very important and it may be something we cannot fully appreciate at this point in our lives - that need...the primary need is not for what the other person can give (not for specific things), but rather it is for the other person himself.

"Yea...though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil!" Why? Because there are no evils there? No - not at all. Because thou art with me! That's why. It is the person himself, you see, who gives himself to the person who meets him, who acknowledges His presence and who thereupon opens himself to life - His life. Said Augustine, "Our hearts are restless 'till they find their rest in Thee".

BACK TO JESUS FOR A MOMENT

Going back to Jesus for a moment. He was so much aware of the presence of God. He felt that presence intensely and uniquely, so much so that He called God, "Father". He was so close to God that men came to say of Jesus that He was the "Son of God". They came to call Him, "The Word of God", and "The image of God". He did not have to seek God out as we sometimes deliberately have to...coming into a Church, or into a room where we can close the doors and shut out the sounds of the world in order to get into a position of openness and quietness where we can be aware of His presence.

And so we begin to see that as Jesus prayed, God gave Himself - His life, His energy, His love, His vitality, His companionship - and it was this that steadied Him time and again - that supported Him, that filled up the reservoirs of His inner life, that fed those invisible sources of energy not only in the critical moments, but all along the ordinary ways of everyday life.

PRAYER AND OURSELVES

Regarding prayer and ourselves, we are apt to be so preoccupied with ourselves and the many things we are about that we don't take sufficient time or effort to be with God in moments of prayer. Our lives are so pressed and so busy that little time is left to develop a vital awareness of God's presence in life.

And not only is it a matter of time and preoccupation with things we consider to be more important, but we also live in an environment where those things that have been an invitation to God's awareness and presence are largely absent. The cement sidewalks and the bricks of buildings cut us off from the good earth and the changing seasons. The tall buildings shut us off from the stars, and we go along from day to day aware of each day's pain and pleasure without many of those gentle reminders of God's transcendent power and peace.

SUGGESTIONS TO FOLLOW

There are three things that I would put before you briefly here near the end of this sermon, three thoughts suggested to us by our Lord's practice with prayer. Carry them along with you and weave them into your thoughts regarding prayer.

One: when you pray, try to think of God - not yourself. Stop and ask yourself the next time you offer a prayer: of whom am I thinking? Myself? What I need and want? Try to think of God, of Jesus rather than yourself.

Second: make your prayers brief, but frequent. Remember the example of the Lord's prayer - how brief and yet how much to the point. To be sure, there was that time when Jesus spent all night in prayer with God, and there may come a time in our lives when we shall do the same, but at the state at which most of now find ourselves, we would do better to pray briefly and frequently, constantly reminding ourselves of God's presence everywhere - his nearness... whether in a Church like this in a service on a Sunday or in the streets and subways of this city. Develop the habit of saying "flash" prayers as you go about your daily routine.

Third: don't keep your eye on the results. That's the wrong thing to do. Try to remember that prayer is not a method of persuasion - not some kind of a heavenly "grab bag", but rather an act of devotion. It's not telling God what you want although you do this in prayer. It's not telling God what to do. He knows what to do. Prayer is a way of finding out what God wants you to do, and putting yourself in the way of receiving the strength and the power to do it...the strength and power He is willing to share.

CLOSING

As you go on from here, thinking about the resources of your own inner life, trying to replenish them, if possible...think about prayer and remember if you will this passage from Luke's Gospel - so helpful...for in a way it tells it all:

"And when Jesus was at the place, He said to them, 'pray that ye enter not into temptation.' And He withdrew from them a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed....'Father, if Thou art willing...remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done!'"

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PRAYER

In these quiet moments, make us sensitive to Your presence and your nearness, O God. Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care. Encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing presence. Point out markers along the way for those who have lost their way. Douse with cold water of common sense any who might this very day be on the verge of some destructive action or unhealthy decision. May the bread and wine open our eyes to the lifting presence of Christ among us. Bind us more closely to each other and to Him and lift up our hearts and minds to You, O God, that we may depart from here renewed in body and soul - fed, nourished and made new. The race is short even at its longest and we would run it well and to Your glory. Amen.

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"A GOD TO PRAY TO"

INTRODUCTION The sermons on the Sunday mornings in Lent this year are concerned with some of the essentials for effective living, or call them if you will - resources of the inner life. Today's sermon is the third sermon in this present series, and it has to do with Jesus, prayer, God, and ourselves.

JESUS PRAYED One of the things that we know about Jesus beyond any shadow of doubt is that he prayed. The Gospel account makes this unmistakably clear. At the beginning of his ministry, when crowds followed him wherever he went, it is written that after he had healed many of their infirmities, he withdrew himself into the wilderness and prayed. Later on in his ministry, when the forces of the opposition began to make themselves felt and he could feel the danger of their threatening power, it is written that he went to a lonely place, a quiet place, and spent the entire night in prayer with God. And finally on the last night of his life, the darkest night of all, he went to the Garden of Gethsemane and it is written that he prayed: "Father, take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done."

We begin then with the obvious fact that Jesus prayed. We know that in the crises of his life he had certain resources that he called on. (1) We know that he had a book to go by - the accumulated wisdom of his people through which the voice of God spoke to him in a unique authority. (2) We know, too, from our time together last Sunday, that he also had a few close intimate friends to whom he was able to turn, men whom he trusted, with whom he could be himself. (3) We also know that in addition to these things and surpassing them all, he had a God to whom he could turn and with whom he spent many rich and wonderful moments in prayer. Of all the resources of his inner life, this was undoubtedly the greatest.

This is the resource that we all need to cultivate. I think if you and I were to talk to each other individually on the deeper levels of life, I'm almost certain that somewhere in our conversation something like this might be said: "I wish prayer were more meaningful to me than it is. I feel a need for it. This is what I want". I know some of you quite well, and I have the feeling that prayer does mean a great deal to you. You have this resource. Some of you do not have it. And none of us have it to the degree to which we would like to have it. All of us, I think, feel undernourished in this particular area of life.

PRAYER: RESPONDING TO THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Suppose we first of all think about prayer in its broad and general character before we consider it in its more specific expression. When a man prays, he is responding to the presence of God. Hundreds of books have been written on the subject of prayer; countless definitions have been offered. I suppose everyone who has ever prayed with any intensity at all has tried to tell others what it is. This past week in preparing this sermon, I looked into my sermon file to see what I had had to say to you on this subject on other occasions. I found eight sermons there on the subject, and as I read them through I noticed that I had given you various definitions and had approached the subject from different angles. None of the sermons included the

whole of what prayer is, but as I thought about it this time, this is what kept running through my mind: when a man prays, he is responding to the presence of God.

For instance, when a person comes into a room (and for the sake of our illustration, let us assume that he is a person of some stature) - you respond to his presence. How? Well, for one thing you do not simply sit there and do nothing. You would rise out of respect. You would greet him one way or another, perhaps shaking hands with him and telling him how delighted you are to see him and to meet him. You would probably go on from there and ask him about himself - what he has been doing, how he is, how his family is. You would listen to him as he tells you about his life and his work. You would pay close attention to what he has to say. And then if he is the kind of person that I have assumed that he is, he will in turn begin to ask you about yourself, and the chances are that you will tell him about the dark days as well as the bright ones, about the difficulties that you have been through, the success you have had - and as you tell him he would listen. Then you may be in a position to ask him for something that you need, or tell him about the things you need the most.

I think all of you will agree on this point - that if you ignore him completely when he comes into the room, it is apt to mean one of two things: either you are not aware of his presence and this may be due to the fact that you are so preoccupied with what you are doing that you're not even conscious of the fact that he's in the room, or you may think that his presence is not worth noticing. You let him come and you let him go, and you lose out because you missed seeing him.

Now perhaps you can see what this is leading up to. It's rather simple. I think a child would understand this approach. If God is present here and there and everywhere, but especially in certain places where his presence is more easily felt, you respond to his presence. You do something. You may stand up, or in the case of God, you are more likely to kneel - to bow your head, because you realize that you are in the presence of the Creator of all life - from whom all life is derived, the Maker of the sun, moon, stars and every living thing. You bow your head. You kneel. You greet him. You say something which indicates your gladness and which expressed in feeble language what you yourself think about him.

And then you listen to him as he tells you about himself and his plans for the world - what he has done and plans to do and what he wants you to do. And then you tell him about yourself - about the things that are weighing heavily on your mind, the questions that perplex you, the responsibilities you are trying to carry.....fearful that you haven't the energy that is necessary to carry them, the temptations and decisions that confront you. Before you leave him, you ask for the things you need. This is natural, the most natural thing in the world for a man to do, so that a man praying (and this I would say is true whether the man be a Christian, a Jew, or a Hindu - any man sincerely praying) - so that a man praying is a man in the presence of Someone other than himself, and the Someone is the One in whom he lives, moves and has his being.

PRAYER: AN INDICATION
OF MAN'S NEED FOR GOD

When a man prays, he is responding to the presence of God. And this too - prayer is also an indication of man's need for God.

That need (and this is very important.....the chances are that most of you will not feel the truth of this at this particular moment. If you don't, I hope you will when you think about it later on) - that need, the primary need is not for what the other can give (not for specific things), but rather for the other person himself. "Yea"... "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear not evil" Why? Because there are no evils there. Not at all. Because thou art with me. It is the person himself, you see, who gives himself to the man who meets him, who acknowledges his presence, and who thereupon opens himself to his life.

Going back to Jesus for a moment. We find that he was always aware of the Father's presence - uniquely and intensely so. No other man has ever been in such a close relationship to God. He was so close to God that men came to say of him that he was the very "Son of God". They called him the "Word of God" - the "image of God". He did not have to seek God out as we sometimes deliberately have to - coming into the church, or into a room where we can close the doors and shut out the noise of the world in order to get into a position of quietness where we can be aware of his presence. He was aware of God's presence all of the time and of his dependence upon God.

And so you see as he prayed, God gave himself, his life, his energy, his vitality, his love, his companionship - and it was this that steadied him time and again, not only in the crucial and critical moments of his life, but all along the ordinary ways of every day.

PRAYER AND OURSELVES

Suppose we consider now for several minutes prayer and ourselves. I suggested to you earlier in the sermon that if a man does not pray it is apt to mean one of two things: either he is not aware of God's presence and this may be because he is so preoccupied with what he is doing, with himself, that he doesn't have time to think about or it may simply be that he doesn't think God's presence is worth noticing, worth taking the time to respond to it. Which group would you put yourself in to? I have the feeling that none of us would fall into the second group, and that most of us would fall into the first group. We're so preoccupied with ourselves and with what we're doing that we don't take the time we ought to take to be with God in prayer. And not only is it a matter of time and our preoccupation with things we consider to be more important, but also we live in a cultural situation where the things that have been an invitation to God's presence are largely absent. The bricks of the street and the cement cut us off from the earth and the changing seasons. The tall buildings of the city that shut us up into the sky shut us off from the stars. We go along from day to day aware of each day's pleasures, its needs, and demands, but that's about all.

And this too: I'm sure many of you would say "I'm not aware very often of God's presence even though I beg blindly in prayer, times when I am driven to my knees....but I don't seem to experience his presence in the way you have been describing. Is there any thing in Jesus' experience that can help me?"

SUGGESTIONS There are three things that I would briefly put before you here at the end which are suggested by our Lord's experience with prayer. Keep them in mind for future use.

One: when you pray, try to think of God and not of yourself. Stop and ask yourself, the next you say your prayers, who am I thinking of - myself? What I Need? What I want? Think of God, and of Jesus.

Two: make your prayers brief, but frequent. Remember the Lord's prayer in the original in Luke's Gospel. Remember how brief it is. Dr. Metzner told us a few weeks ago in one of his sermons that there are only To be sure, Jesus spent all night in prayer with God, and there may come a time in our lives when we do the same. But at the state at which most of us now are, we would do better to pray briefly and frequently, constantly reminding ourselves of the presence of God everywhere, whether it be in a church like this that speaks to us of God, or in the drab streets of a city.

And one final suggestion: Don't keep your eye on the results. That is fatal. Remember, prayer is not a method of persuasion, but rather an act of devotion. I'm sure you agree. Remember this: prayer is not telling God what you want although you do this in prayer. It is not telling God what to do; he knows what to do. Prayer is a way of finding out what God wants you to do, and putting yourself in the way of receiving the strength he is willing and glad to give to you.

CLOSING: As you consider then the resources of your inner life, think about prayer and listen to this lines from Luke's Gospel: "And when Jesus was at the place, he said to them - 'pray that ye enter not into temptation'. And he withdraw from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed. 'Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.' And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him".

LET US PRAY: Open our hearts and our minds to thyself, Our Father. May we never be so preoccupied with other things that we are blind to thy presence. Give us the grace to know thee and to see thee, to reveal ourselves to thee and to accept from thee the things which thou art ready to give to us. In the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ thy son. Amen

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Members and friends are invited to share in the warmth and friendliness of the coffee hour that will be held in Fellowship Hall following the service. If you are a visitor, we would not only like to invite you to this coffee hour, but we would like to urge you to take a moment following the service to introduce yourself to us and also to leave with us a record of your visit by signing one of our Guest Books.

The various announcements are in the bulletin. You will notice that the Young Adults will be meeting this evening at seven o'clock. New members are always welcome.

You will notice, too, the announcement reminding you that today is Dedication Sunday.....the Sunday when we present to the church our pledge cards. This we shall do following the sermon....without announcement from the pulpit. This year, instead of your coming forward to present your card, we shall have the ushers move quietly and quickly among you receiving your pledge card.

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We come now to that time in our service when all of us have the opportunity to participate by presenting unto God and to the work of this church our own material gifts and blessings. Jesus said: IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN IT IS TO RECEIVE... In this spirit let us worship God with our morning offering.