

"HANG IN THERE WITH YOUR PRAYERS"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

The debate over prayer in our public schools continues. I've often felt that supporters of it make it sound like prayer is such an easy, almost trivial thing. They tend to imply that prayer is just an exercise, a formality and that all it requires is that children be quiet for 20 or 30 seconds at the start of the day while the teacher reads a prayer to no god in particular, about things of no great consequence.

Sometimes you'll hear people ask, what harm can it do? It's just a formality anyway. Who could ever object to such a little prayer? It may do some good, and some may say that it may even teach children to pray. But if that's the purpose of prayer in school then I have another suggestion. I wonder what would happen if it were assigned as homework. Mom and dad are used to helping children with science and math. Wouldn't it be interesting if a son or a daughter came home and said, "Daddy, teach me to pray?"

And Daddy doesn't want to do it because he knows that it's hard to pray. I mean real prayer. Real prayer is addressed to God. You speak what is on your heart. You lay bare your soul. You confess your sins. You turn over your deepest fears. You ask for grace to help face those things in life that you know you don't have the strength to face on your own. That's what prayer really is. And it's not easy. It's often hard.

IN THE BIBLE

Now when I read my Bible I find few instances of "easy" prayer. When "easy" prayer is mentioned in the Bible it is always to condemn it. Jesus Himself said, "Not those who say, 'Lord, Lord....'". That's a condemnation of easy, glib prayer. And after the Parable following the one which is our text for today He told the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The Pharisee, you'll recall, prayed on...confidently, glibly, on and on, eloquently. And the tax collector struggled, beat his chest, stumbled, stuttered and finally blurted out, "God, be merciful to me". That's all he could say.

And then the text which I chose from the Old Testament, that of Jacob wrestling with the angel, which I interpret to be a metaphor for the struggle of prayer. In the Old Testament it would be blasphemous to have a human being wrestle with God. But the angels were God's messengers, His emissaries. So if you wrestled with God you wrestled with the angel. That's what prayer is. Jacob waking up in the middle of the night and wrestling with God in prayer. And our Lord in Gethsemane's Garden in a similar struggle - long, arduous hours into the night. That prayer in Gethsemane was not an "easy" prayer. It was a Jacobean kind of struggle.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us, "Do not heap up empty phrases". Well, if you don't heap up empty phrases you're going to have to work at it. Have you ever tried to write anything significant? It's easy to heap up empty phrases and to use the old cliches. But if you're going to write anything that is genuine or real, that goes down deep in your life, that really expresses how you feel, then it's going to take work.

In the Sermon on the Mount He followed that lesson about not heaping up phrases with a model of prayer, the "Our Father" which we call, "The Lord's Prayer". It's a model prayer. That's what it is. Christians have always prayed it as a liturgical prayer. Whenever we gather for worship, we pray The Lord's Prayer, the "Our Father". It helps to unite us as Christians all around the world.

But because we do it so often we are tempted to make petitions of the Lord's Prayer into empty phrases. I doubt if the first Christians did that, especially that petition, "Thy Kingdom Come", because they were expecting it to come. They had staked their lives on it coming and they prayed every day for its coming. But it didn't come, and that produced the crisis. "When is the Kingdom coming?" "When do we stop praying for the Kingdom to come?" And Luke and the other Gospel writers are addressing congregations for whom that is the most serious problem they face. "When is the Kingdom coming? We pray for it. Nothing happens."

PARABLE OF THE UNJUST JUDGE

And Luke answers that question with a Parable that Jesus taught. It's our text for this morning. It's called the Parable of the Unjust Judge. It's about a widow who wants a judge to hear her case. But she's a "nobody". And then, as often is the case now-a-days, it's very difficult to be heard if you're a nobody, if you're poor, if you don't count for anything in society. That's just the way the world is and that's why our President receives press attention when he mentions a Jean Nguyen or a Clara Hale in an address as he did this week. But this woman is not going to be content with the way the world is. She keeps coming to the Judge and he keeps refusing to hear her and see her. His secretary says, "He's busy". She says, "I'll wait". He sneaks out the back door of his office. She waits for him in the alley. Finally he hears her case, just to get rid of her.

Now the point of the parable is not that God is like that, but that He isn't. This is a "how much more" parable. If an unjust judge will finally hear a widow's plea, how much more will God be attentive to your prayers? And that point is brought home with what follows the parable, and also what precedes it. It's addressed to people who pray for the Kingdom to come and who have been disappointed. The parable is followed by these words of Jesus,

"And will not God vindicate His elect who cry to Him day and night? Will He delay long over them. I tell you, He will vindicate them speedily."

That follows the Parable and these are the words of Luke that preceded it, "He told them a parable to the effect that they would always pray and never lose heart." So, hang in there. That's the message. Don't give up. Keep on praying.

A GREAT MYSTERY ABOUT PRAYER

You see, there's a great mystery about prayer. Some people claim to have unlocked the secret of prayer. They write books about it. They say they have a technique that makes prayer effective and always easy. But I don't know of any techniques like that. Nor do I find any in the Bible. You'd think that if Jesus knew a technique for easy prayer He would have passed it on to us. But all He taught us about prayer is to be honest, and to hang in there. Don't give in. Don't give up.

I think that real prayer is difficult because prayer is relationship with God and like any human relationship, it's a mystery. We don't understand it. There are times when communication with somebody takes place easily and it's tremendously rewarding. You know what we say when that happens? We say, "Well, we just hit it off...." That's about as unscientific a conclusion about something you could ever make. You just "hit it off". But that's about all you can say. The chemistry was right. It just happened. But why it happens is always a bit of a mystery.

Sometimes it happens and at other times it doesn't. We talk right past one another and end up exchanging trivial conversation. We are uncomfortable. It's like cocktail party conversation. You just want to get out of there; it doesn't work. That's just the mystery of human relationships and communication. And Jesus told the Parable of the woman trying to get her message across to a judge who won't give her the time of day because our conversation with others is the most appropriate analogy of what it is like to pray to God.

Jesus used that parable because He knew that sometimes prayer is like you're talking to somebody and all of a sudden you noticed he's turned away, he's not listening. Sometimes it's like that.

This Parable is also called "The Parable of the Importunate Woman". I like that word - importunate. It means persistent, even to the point of being a pest, overpressing in request or demand, troublesomely urgent. If Jesus offered any technique for prayer, perhaps this is it. Only I think He would put it this way. If a woman before an unjust judge will be importunate, how much more should you be patient before God? Because He taught us these things about God. We can count on these things! God knows you the way a shepherd knows his sheep. God cares for you the way the shepherd will leave the ninety and nine and go after the one that's lost. God wills only that your life be good, as a Father wills nothing but the best for His children. God is like that. So, if a woman can be importunate with an unjust judge, how much more should you be patient before God?

REFLECTIONS ON THE PARABLE

Suffice it is to say now that there is a quality of life that just can't be gained any other way but through patience and quiet - two things, incidentally that just aren't highly regarded in our time.

I remember reading somewhere about the amazing discovery that awaits you if you just examine one little square foot of ground in your back yard. If you were to sit quietly for an hour in your backyard and concentrate closely on the smallest fraction of nature at your feet you'd be stunned with the teeming complexity and the amazing fecundity of life that's there at your very doorstep. You don't see it. And the reason you don't see it, and the reason we don't see so much of the rest of creation about us is because we cannot sit quietly, not even for one hour.

You've got to be patient. So how much more should we be patient in prayer? That's the main message.

ANOTHER LESSON HERE

But there's another lesson here, too. We find it not in the parable itself, since parables are always told just to make one point, and the point of this parable is - be persistent...keep at it with your prayers. But there is a lesson in what we know of the resolution of the crisis in the early Church that prompted this parable. The Church prayed for the coming of the Kingdom of God, and they expected its coming in a certain manner. And when it didn't come in that manner they assumed that their prayers weren't answered. It was not until later that they discovered that the Kingdom had already come in a way they had never expected.

That's the message of the Gospel of John, and that's the main difference between the Gospel of John and the other three Gospels. John was written later than the other three Gospels - about a generation later. And it was written to announce that the prayer for the Kingdom had been answered.

John re-wrote the story of Jesus to emphasize that the Kingdom of God is here, and therefore the new life is possible right now. He has Jesus say, "I have come that you might have life and have it in abundance." That means you don't have to wait for some cataclysmic event in the future in order to enter the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is here right now all about you if you could only see it. And that's why John in His Gospel account spends so much time talking about light and darkness and about seeing and being blind. His point is that while you're praying for the Kingdom, God has already given it to you.

The problem is not that God is deaf to your petition, but that you are blind to His grace. And when we pray we ought to remember that. If it is true, as Jesus said, that God hears our prayers before we speak them, maybe it's also true that he answers them before we expect the answer, and that He answers them in ways that we never imagined which reminds me of a story that is going around.

WHY DIDN'T YOU ANSWER MY PRAYERS?

I've heard this story in one or two different places and Steve Markuson, our bass soloist, shared it with me the first time, having heard it in a service at Temple. It's about the time when those floods were rising down in the South. A man went out on his front porch and discovered the water surrounded his house. He couldn't get out; he was stuck there. Pretty soon a boat came by and they offered to rescue the man, but he said "no". "I prayed to God to rescue me and I trust in God alone". The water apparently continued to rise and he had to leave the porch and climbed up to the second story. Another boat came by and again they called to him, offering to rescue him. He shouted back a second time, "No, I have prayed to God. I trust that He will deliver me." The water continued to rise and he had to retreat to the roof. A helicopter came by and dropped a life-line and told him to clumb up. He said again, "No, I've prayed to God. I trust Him. He will deliver me."

Well, the man drowns. He goes to heaven, goes to the throne of God and complains to God. "I trusted you. Why didn't you answer my prayers?" God says, "I did. I sent you two boats and a helicopter."

That's not a funny story, but it's still a good story with a bit of a point. It's got a precedent in the history of the Church. The Church praying for the Kingdom of God, looking for it to come one way, finally seeing that God had given it as a gift in a way they never imagined.

AUGUSTINE AND HIS MOTHER

It's like the story of St. Monica, Augustine's mother, a story that hits close to home for those of us who are parents. We have to let our children go after a time, and all we can do is pray for them. St. Monica was a Christian; he son, Augustine, was not. A wild man, a libertine. She prayed for him daily; she prayed intense, emotional prayers.

When Augustine's restlessness led him to lead North Africa and his home to go to Italy, she was really worried. You know about Italy. She prayed for him to stay, so she could continue to have influence over him. That made sense. If God were going to answer her prayer certainly she'd be the one through whom he would answer the prayer. But he went to Italy anyway, and she was sure her prayers were unanswered. But in Italy he met Ambrose, and it was Ambrose's influence that converted Augustine to Christianity.

You see the lesson. Prayer is a mystery we don't understand. We will never understand it. We do understand this. We know what Jesus revealed about God -

that He knows us, that He cares for us, and He wills only that our lives be good. Then He told a parable about an importunate widow who never gave up and He said if she doesn't, neither should you. And Luke introduced the parable in these words:

"He told the parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and never to lose heart."

And so may we. Amen!

PRAYER Our lives are not always easy, O God, and we do ask for the faith that sustains us in all of life's experience. Help us to be persistent in terms of our prayers, never to use easy approaches and never to accept the easy, glib answers. Make us sensitive to Your presence in our midst, in our lives, that we may know and understand your answer to our prayers. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.