

THE WAY OF JESUS
"III. In Prayer"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
Third Sunday in Lent
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and saith unto the disciples, 'Sit ye here, while I go and
pray yonder.'

Prayer can take place anywhere, but silence and solitude, I feel, are always helpful. Luke, in His Gospel, speaks of ten crisis situations in which Jesus prayed. In each instance Jesus went off by Himself. From the tension and turmoil of life, from the fatigue of dealing with many people, He sought renewal and perspective by withdrawing for quiet prayer.

When we're in trouble, our first impulse is to share it with the first person who's willing to listen. Granted - there is therapy in that, but telling our troubles to everyone who will listen is not always the best thing. It might be better if we first went off by ourselves...into the quiet place and there did some real praying. This is the reason I feel it's important to have a place like this sanctuary open during the week in order to provide people with a quiet place where they can come and talk to God. And many do. More than we think.

You and I live so constantly as a part of the crowd that we forget the value of solitude. Meaningful aloneness is a necessary condition for creativity. Goethe, the German poet, once remarked:

"No one can produce anything important unless he isolates himself."

Thoughtful persons value their privacy.

"The right to be alone" wrote Justice Louis Brandesi, "is the most comprehensive of rights and the right most valued by civilized men."

How important it is to our emotional health and well-being that we go off and establish deliberately the place of quiet retreat - that nook where we can be alone.

USE OF OUR SOLITUDE

Now, in this place of solitude we will not sit passively - nor continue the fret and the fever of our own thoughts - nor mumble petitions by rote. These have very little value and yet this is apt to be the tendency with some of us.

Alfred North Whitehead, the great philosopher, once defined religion in this sense as "what an individual does with his solitariness". And here the emphasis is on the word DOES. Going off by oneself is much more than the physical act of withdrawing from people and the noise around us. It is that deep spiritual process of shutting the doors so that our lives - with their fears, their ambitions, their sins, their thoughts - are confronted with a consuming "holiness" that compels us to confess our dependence, our unworthiness, our estrangement.

It is becoming receptive - knowing that here in the quietness, God can give us direction and grant us that measure of inner peace that the world cannot give nor take away. The life of Jesus was one of the most troubled lives outwardly ever lived, and yet inwardly - His life was like a sea of glass.

As the poet penned:

"Jesus often withdrew from the crowd,
Across the sea to the mountain top,

In a desert drear, or a garden green,
Withdrew to worship God, to meditate,
To make His vision clear, His purpose strong,
And thus - through prayer - to see His way to go."

It was in Gethsemane's Garden that Jesus prayed, "Father, all things are possible unto Thee". In praying this way, Jesus took His mind off Himself and His distress and focussed it upon the love and the power of God.

This is not easy to do. When we're in deep trouble, the mind is inclined to hold on to its worries, going over them again and again. We seek the quiet place, but our thoughts continue to bubble with the claims of our immediate need. And this is apt to be all the more true if our prayers are said only when we're in a crisis situation.

It was customary for Jesus to turn to God as a constant expression of a life of deep commitment and trust. He looked to God, whom He called Father, because of what He believed. He believed that with God all things are possible. He was deeply aware of God's greatness, His majesty, His moral splendor, and He was also conscious of His own dependence upon that power.

PETITION IN HIS PRAYERS

On occasion, the prayers of Jesus took the form of petition. It had a natural place in His prayers. Remember in the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me." When it comes to petition in our prayers, we need to remember this helpful thought shared by George Harkness:

"We pray for anything we truly need - anything appropriate to the nature of God...anything we can ask in the spirit of Christ."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian martyr under the Nazis, said that "The essence of Christianity is...definite concrete petition." You may ask then: what can we reasonably expect from our moments of prayer? What is it that happens when a person pauses to pray regularly? There are certain results which we can perceive."

INSIGHT

For one thing, we will nearly always perceive a direction and gain an insight when we pray. It is this kind of insight, I believe, that results in spiritual growth. Jesus prayed that "this cup might pass from me"...but that petition was not granted and when it was not granted, He then knew that the purpose of God could not be fulfilled except by the way of the Cross. In a sense the prayer was answered for He knew what He must do.

POWER

Furthermore, an additional result from prayer - if the circumstances about which we are praying do not change - is found in that we shall receive sufficient power to endure the condition. It was with keen insight that Martin Luther recorded the effect of this result, saying:

"A Christian knows that he is not refused what he has prayed for and finds - in fact - that he is helped in all troubles, and that God gives him the power to bear his troubles and to overcome them which is just the same thing as taking his troubles away from him - and making it no longer misfortune

or distress, seeing it has been overcome".

In other words, in making our requests known we will be helped, and our faith and our patience will be renewed if we remember that prayer is not an exercise in outwitting God's opposition and reluctance, but is the process of learning to cooperate with His plan for our highest good. We should not expect that God will manipulate the universe at our requests. We do have an assurance that He has a good purpose and destiny for our lives.

COMMITMENT This experience in Gethsemane, while starting with a specific petition on the part of Jesus, did not end there. It concluded with a complete and a creative surrender to the will of God.

Commitment - in prayer - is that moment of resolution to go forward in Christlike living - to genuinely share the emotions, the burdens and the sufferings of those for whom we pray, and to live in a fine and loyal and obedience to God's will, even at the cost of personal sacrifice.

ACTION Insight. Power. Commitment. There is yet one more thing. I believe that commitment leads to action. Having committed Himself to the will of God, Jesus then said, "Rise...let us be going...see my betrayer is at hand."

The prayers of Jesus always resulted in action. It was not for Him an isolated experience separated from the deeper purpose of His life. It was not a form of escape. It was not secluded meditation. We pray in order to live life as it ought to be lived. Action followed His time of prayer.

And so as Jesus prayed, the deep and mysterious transactions of God's moral universe were unleashed and enacted. When He rose from His knees to re-join His sleeping disciples, He was committed to the will of the Father and was strengthened for those events that were ahead. All of this is beautifully summed up in those lines written by Richard Trench:

"Lord, what a change within us one short hour
Spent in Thy presence will avail to make.

When heavy burdens from our bosoms take
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We kneel, and all around us seems to lower;
We rise, and all the distant and the near,
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PRAYER Help us, O God, as we draw apart from the world during this Season of Lent...this time of soul refreshment, to see once again the way of Jesus in decision, with people and now today in prayer.

We do this with new eyes and with deeper understanding. Help us, when we see Him, to follow Him, and then to show to other in the world where we work and live His amazing life. We ask this in the name of Him who is for us...

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INTRODUCTION The sermons during Lent this year are exploring the way of Jesus in meeting life situations. His way should be our way. Today we turn to consider the way of Jesus in prayer.

We find that in the crucial moments of His life He prayed. At the beginning of His ministry, He prayed in order to arrive at a better understanding of the will of God for His life. When the constant press of people drained His spiritual energies, He withdrew to a quiet place in the nearby hills. When the Last Supper was over and He was preparing for the final, tragic events, He led His disciples into the Garden of Gethsemane and invited some of them to share with Him in a lonely vigil of prayer. Hanging on a cross, surrounded by a jeering mob, He prayed for His enemies in words of breath-taking power and beauty, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do". And with the prayerful affirmation, "Into thy hands I commend My spirit", His earthly life came to an end.

DEVELOPMENT Prayer for Jesus was a natural part of His life's experience. It should be so for us.

A number of years ago, the astronaut Gordon Cooper, made history when he composed a prayer while orbiting the earth. First recorded while he was aloft, it was played over radio and television. You'll recall that at a later date he was invited to offer the prayer before Congress. Invitations came to him from church groups. He remarked in a talk to one church group some words that I appreciated and wrote down:

"I believe" he said, "that God and prayer should be a part of everyday life. Our faith is something that should be there all the time".

Keeping in touch with God through an active life of prayer not limited to just Sunday mornings is meaningful not only to Gordon Cooper, but also to a number of you.

Those words of Sir Harry Lauder, the Scots entertainer and singer, upon learning of the loss of his only son in World War I are remembered by some of you:

"When a person comes to a thing like this, there are just three ways out of it: there's drink - there's despair - and there's God! And by His grace, it's God for me!"

This was the way that Jesus chose to take on the Thursday night of Holy Week as He saw the grim shadow of the cross coming closer and closer.

SOLITUDE Let's use that scene in the Garden of Gethsemane in order to come to a better understanding of His way in prayer.

One of the first things I notice is that He sought solitude. He left the larger group behind. He took three very close friends and went on a little bit further. The Passion narrative describes it in this fashion:

"Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, 'Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder.'"

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helpful. Luke, in his Gospel, speaks of ten crisis situations in which Jesus prayed. In each instance Jesus went off by Himself. From the turmoil and the tensions of life, from the fatigue of dealing with many people, He sought renewal and perspective by withdrawing for quiet prayer.

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