

"TIMES WHEN NOT TO PRAY"

INTRODUCTION I am aware that I have violated a fundamental rule of homiletics by stating the general theme of today's sermon in the negative. My intention is to speak a good word for piety in general and for prayer in particular.

Piety - that is, our devotion to religious duties and practices - finds its source and its heart in prayer. As prayer goes, so goes piety. And prayer isn't going too well in our world just now. I'm reminded of the woman who in her shopping bought one of those signs that all of us have seen that says, "Prayer Changes Things". She thought it would be good to have around the home and put it up in the living room. When her husband came home that night he took one look at the sign, removed it and said, "I don't want things changed. I like them the way they are".

REASONS FOR DEMISE OF PRAYER There are a variety of reasons for this demise of prayer and the lack of it in our lives and in our homes. Changing views of God, changing views of the universe, changing views of man, and of ourselves. All play a part, but one has the feeling that prayer is no longer dominant in our lives primarily because we have not found it to be that meaningful.

Pragmatically speaking and in all candor, many of us might say that we have tried prayer and it simply hasn't worked, that it hasn't made a difference for us. Huckleberry Finn had some problems with prayer that remind us of our problems:

"Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but no-thing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and what-ever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fishline, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, and I never could make it work. By and by, one day I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I were a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out anyway. I set down one time back in the wood and had a long think about it all. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork. And why can't the widow Brown get back her silver snuffbox that was stole. Why can't Miss Watson get fatted up. No, I says to myself - there ain't nothing to it".

I think part of Huck Finn's problem was tied into the fact that he prayed when perhaps he should have been doing something else. And this may be a part of our problem, too. Anyway, let's think about it. "Times When Not to Pray"

PRAY WHEN WE SHOULD ACT First-off, sometimes we pray when we really ought to act. There's a good illustration of this inclination in the Old Testament Book of Exodus. The Hebrew children were being hounded by the army of the Egyptians and were stalled with fear at the sight of the Red Sea before them. Quickly, they brought their gripes and fears to the head man, Moses, who immediately threw himself down before God and had a conference with him. God's reaction to the prayers of Moses at this cru-

cial time was quite surprising. The Lord said to Moses in this high level conference,

"Why do you cry to me, Moses. Get up and tell the people of Israel to go forward."

In other words, prayer must be followed by the courage to act. Prayer becomes a flat and arduous business when we refuse to act by moving out. The missionaries of another day use to say, we must "move out" on the promises of God.

After we have prayed sufficiently about a matter, it may become clear to us that there is some relationship that should be dropped; some ambition that should be renounced; some decision that should be made; some road that should be followed. Until we take such action our prayers will likely become a meaningless indulgence in misdirected piety.

David Read, minister at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, spoke to this point in one of his sermons built on the phrase from a Psalm, "I will walk in Thy truth". Said he,

"Prayer that is not backed by resolution is nothing more than a kind of spiritual filibuster. We avoid the decision by endless talking to God. There is no use praying for God's way if we are not prepared to follow it; no use praying for light if we don't use what is given us. 'I will walk in thy truth'. The man or woman of true piety (he said) is not simply a devout believer in prayer, but resolute and determined".

There needs to be that desirable juncture of prayer and of action. One time when not to pray is when we ought to act on what we know, what we believe.

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At other times we sometimes pray when in fact we ought to be doing some repenting.

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"Get thee up. Wherefore thout liest thus upon thy face. Up. Sanctify the people!"

In other words, prayer cannot by-pass the fact of wrong-doing or sinful behavior. We can never pray over or around unrighteousness. This, of course, is the grand theme of the Old Testament prophets - that the priestly without the prophetic is ineffective; that prayer unless it is joined with righteousness is something of a mockery to God.

Listen to these words from Isaiah:

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"Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him..."

"Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard".

"Then you shall call and the Lord will answer, you shall cry and He will say, 'Here am I'"

And from Amos:

"I hate, I despise your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream".

It is a tribute, is it not, a tribute to prayer that we cannot sanction unrighteousness or approve immoral behaviour and still find prayer to be meaningful. Prayer is morally and ethically conditioned. Messy living in our lives can make it difficult to experience meaningful prayer.

There's a scene in Shakespeare's Macbeth that comes to mind. The murder has been committed. Duncan is dead in his bed. Macbeth goes in to be sure that the watchmen who guarded the King are not aware of his crime. He comes back and says to his wife:

"There's one did laugh in his sleep and cried 'murder'... that they did wake each other. I stood and heard them. But they did say their prayers and address'd them again to sleep. One cried, 'God bless us', and 'Amen' the other - as they had seen me with these hangman's hand. Listening to their fears, I could not say 'Amen' when they did say 'God bless us'.

Lady Macbeth interrupts, 'Consider it not so deeply'. But Macbeth goes on, 'but wherefore could I not pronounce Amen? I had most need of blessing and 'amen' stuck in my throat'".

We cannot pray one way and live another, else like Macbeth the 'amen' may stick in our throats, too. We cannot live lives of deceit and dishonesty and then expect prayer to be meaningful to us. We cannot expect prayer to be meaningful to us if we take to ourselves bread enough and to spare and in the privacy of our thoughts say to ourselves, "forget the plight of others". "Why liest thou here? Up! Sanctify the people". "For, if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me."

PRAY WHEN WE SHOULD BE RECONCILING

And finally, we pray when we should be doing something about matters of reconciliation. Those searching words of Jesus read earlier in the service touch us here:

"So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go: first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift".

This is a radical word. Usually when we stop to think of how radical or how revolutionary Jesus was, we think immediately of that day when he played bottoms up with the temple tables. But really, this was mild compared to some of his radical observations on worship. If, when you come to perform your act of piety, you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift. Go - be reconciled and then....He didn't say, "run through the rest of the service, take communion, sing the last hymn, catch a cup of coffee with your friends, and then go out and make things right". He wasn't saying that. He said, leave thy gift there at the altar. Seek out thy brother or whoever it is with whom you have an appointment for reconciliation, and then come and make your gift.

This is the third of those times when not to pray - a time when we should be "making up", getting things "squared away" with someone else. Our prayers can be stifled by those accumulated resentments on the calendar.

There are basic sensate experiences that we can know in our relationships to the physical world in which we live, sensations that no one can feel for us. I jotted down several and perhaps you can add to the list: a ride in a roller coaster for the first time, diving or jumping into water from the highboard, a parachute leap, skiing down a mountain side, putting a ball through the basket from forty feet out, riding in a NYC taxi.

But, there are also basic experiences that belong to a man in the deep life of his soul, his spirit. Here I suggest three: the experience of awe, as when we stand in the presence of the majesty of God's creation - a mountain towering dim purple in the distance, or a beautiful sunset. There's also the feeling of penitence as when we stand confronted by the holy and can only think to say "It's me, it's me, O Lord...standing in the need of prayer". And there is also the experience of reconciliation between two people, that experience we describe with such words as joy! peace! freedom! life! release!

It may be that we have never left our gift at the altar in order to first reunite that which has been severed. Our human relationships are so precious. We must see to it that pride does not prevent reconciliation from taking place. We are never closer to God than when we become agents of reconciliation.

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No human father could do that...in light of the hurt, the pain the father had suffered". "But this story is the story of the astounding and astonishing love of God."..."that comes to us through Christ".

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PRAYER Our lives are not easy, O God, and we pray for strength and for courage to face whatever may be before us. In the quietness of this hour, we pause to look inward and ask ourselves: have we been praying when we should have been acting, "moving out". Have we been praying when we should have been repenting? When we should have been seeking reconciliation with some other person.

Move in our hearts, Lord Jesus and make us better followers of yours. Be with each of us in the days of this week ahead. We ask this in the name of Christ in whom we see life's highest hope as well as its deepest meaning. Amen

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And even then, some aren't really turned on or tuned in on those moments of prayer. Their minds are apt to be running in other directions. I'm reminded of the woman who in her shopping bought one of those signs that all of us have seen that says, "Prayer Changes Things". She thought it would be good to have around the home and put it up in the living room. When her husband came home that night he took one look at the sign, removed it and said, "I don't want things changed. I like them the way they are".

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I remember a few years ago when I was reading Bishop Robinson's little book, Honest To God, how it came as a surprise to me to read his own acknowledgement that prayer for him bordered on the meaningless until he began to correlate his prayer with his work. He goes on in one place in the book to testify that when he is counselling someone who comes to him for advice, or otherwise putting his life into the lives of others, prayer becomes meaningful. Here there is that desirable juncture of prayer and of work. One time when not to pray is when we ought to act on what we know....what we believe!

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selves, "forget the plight of the other America and the rest of the world". "Why liest thou here? Up. Sanctify the people". For, "if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me".

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Those searching words of Jesus touch us here:

"So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go: first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift".

This is a radical word. Usually when we stop to think of how radical or how revolutionary Jesus was, we think immediately of that day when he played bottoms up with the temple tables. But really, this was mild compared to some of his radical observations on worship. If, when you come to perform your act of piety, you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift. Go - be reconciled and then.... He didn't say, "run through the rest of the service, take communion, sing the last hymn, catch a cup of coffee with your friends, and then go out and make things right". He wasn't saying that. He said, leave thy gift there at the altar. Seek out thy brother or whoever it is with whom you have an appointment for reconciliation, and then come and make your gift.

This is the third of those times when not to pray, a time when we should be "making up", getting things "squared away" with someone else. Our prayers can be stifled by the accumulated resentments on the calendar. And I would venture to say that eventually we get to the place where either we give up our resentments or we give up prayer.

There are basic sensate experiences that we can know in our relationships to the physical world in which we live, sensations that no one can feel for us. I jotted down a few this week and perhaps you can add to the list: a ride in a roller coaster for the first time, diving or jumping into water from the highboard, a parachute leap, skiing down a mountain side, orbiting the earth in a space craft, hitting a baseball over a fence three hundred feet away, or putting the ball through the basket from forty feet out, and perhaps we could add: riding in a NYC taxi.

But there are also basic experiences that belong to a man in the deep life of his soul, his spirit. Here I suggest three: the experience of awe, as when we stand in the presence of the majesty of God's handiwork - a mountain towering dim purple in the distance, or a beautiful sunset, or the full moon coming out of the ocean waters. There is also the feeling of penitence as when we stand confronted by the holy and can only think to say, "It's me, It's me, O Lord - standing in the need of prayer". And there is also the experience of reconciliation between two people, that experience we describe with such words as joy! peace! freedom! life! release! It may be that prayer for some has become a humdrum, sometime thing, because we have never known what it is to overcome estrangement and alienation. It may be that we have never left our gift at the altar in order to first reunite that which has been severed. Human relationships - precious. See to it that pride does not

We are never more like God than when we become agents of reconciliation. Reuel pre-Howe tells a beautiful story that I share with you in closing. A Chinese painter vent. wanted to paint a picture of the Prodigal Son. His first offering or drawing had

the father standing by the gate looking down the road toward the son who was obviously coming home. A Christian friend said, "No, you don't have it quite right. The father should not be standing waiting. He should be running to meet his son". The artist responded, "Yes, but no Chinese father could do that". The friend replied, "But that's just the point. No human father could do that, in light of the hurt, the pain, the injury, the distress the father had suffered because of the son". "But this story is the story of the astounding and astonishing love of God" down the path to

In the final picture the artist showed the father running to meet his son, and the shoes on his feet did not match.

LET US PRAY Our lives, O God, are not always easy, and we pray for strength and for courage to face whatever may be before us. Life, with its demands, can be so hard. In the quietness of these moments we pause to ask ourselves have we been praying when we should have been acting, moving out and on? Have we been praying when we should have been repenting? When we have been seeking reconciliation with another?

~~And now to thy keeping, we commit ourselves. All this~~ we ask in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen