

March 8, 2009

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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### **Prayer is Not Magic** by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Luke 15:11-24

Magic is back. Laetril cures cancer. Acupuncture is useful for deafness and low back pain. St. John's Wort is good for anything. Take Geritol and your husband will say, "She's my wife and I love her." Meditation, bio-feedback, line-dancing and weekend retreats where you shout each other down in crowded rooms, will set your life in order.

"Granny used to take a constitutional to keep all systems 'go,' but now we're into jogging." Running's not only good exercise, but has acquired a medicinal value formerly attributed to rare herbs from Indochina. Last week I even heard a man interviewed on TV describing running as "my salvation." One of the best players ever to dribble and shoot a basketball calls himself "Magic" Johnson and on Broadway, two recent hits are *The Magic Show* and *Merlin*. Surely, magic is back.

While in seminary I had a friend who couldn't decide what kind of car to buy. He had prayed for guidance, talked with knowledgeable people, and still couldn't come to a decision. So, late one night, he prayed for God to give him a sign. He then randomly opened his Bible and began to read. He had opened to the Palm Sunday story and when he read about Jesus entering Jerusalem on a colt, he felt sure his prayer had been answered. He went out the next day and bought a Dodge Colt.

Magic is saying "abracadabra" and pulling the rabbit out of the hat. It's gargling with Listerine so

everybody will love you. Magic is a dashboard Jesus to prevent smash-ups. It's going to church so you will get to heaven. Magic is the technique of controlling unseen powers. Magic will always work if you do it by the book. Magic is manipulation and says, "My will be done." And, magic is back.

Newspaper report: *Pittsburgh Press* – the *Crime Round-Up Section* – the headline reads: "*Her Prayer Repels Attacker in Squirrel Hill.*" The article continues: *Prayer apparently saved a 22 year-old woman from being raped last night on Warwick Terrace in Squirrel Hill.*

*According to police, a man wearing only a long sleeve denim shirt jumped out of a car there and attacked the woman as she walked home from Carnegie-Mellon University about 11:30 P.M. The nearly nude man was covered completely with a Vaseline-like substance, the woman told police. As the attacker pushed her to the ground and jumped on top of her, she said, "God, please help this guy understand." Jumping up immediately, the attacker said, "I'm a Christian," and drove off.*

Yes, prayer is back. Oh, did I say prayer is back? I meant magic is back. Is prayer back too? Is prayer magic?

Recently a group was discussing the demise of prayer in the public schools and someone said, "Don't worry. As long as there are final exams, there will always be prayer in the public schools." I like that. It's not only funny – it's true. We could also say as long as there are cars, there will be prayers, for we ask God to help find our lost car keys, and we pray for parking spaces, and sometimes our prayers are answered.

Looking at prayer as a form of magic has always been part of the religious scene. The Jews of the Old Testament expected that their temple (where they prayed to God) would make all of Jerusalem impregnable to threats from their enemies. Today, the attitude that God will give us anything we want if we pray correctly, is voiced over and over again on the media religious shows. Some even point to the New Testament and the passage from the Sermon on the Mount, "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." (See Matt. 7:7.)

To be honest, I've always had trouble with that verse. Whatever its intent I don't think it is meant to reduce almighty God to a heavenly Mr. Fix-it or a super magician who is ready to dispense all kinds of good things if we simply press the right buttons.

My experience of God is that God does not let himself be found in that way. After all, are we so stupid that we would not turn to God, or to anything else for that matter, if it were found to consistently pay off? If all we needed to do was say, "Okay, I'll pray to you if I can expect no disastrous illnesses, no accident, a long prosperous life and everything going well with the kids. Friends, God is not a means to our ends – even good ends such as these. I don't know about you, but I have experienced God *not* in the direct control of all the details of my life – like producing a parking space when I need one. No – I experience God as a *lack of fulfillment* in life's details. *I experience God as a deep longing.*

Prayer is not magic.

Maybe our prayers will be answered, and maybe they won't, at least not the way we want, or when we want, and maybe not at all. Even if we do it by the book, prayer doesn't always work. Jesus pointed this out in one of his more somber utterances when he said, "Not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord' shall

enter the kingdom of heaven.” (See Matt. 7:21.) He softened the blow somewhat by adding that the way to enter the kingdom of heaven is to do the will of the Father. When we claim we are always sure of what that will is, we are only bluffing. Magic is always sure.

A colleague in the ministry who lives in California took his two boys on a camping trip in June. In the evening, it became cloudy and his boys said to him, “Hey, Dad, we’re going to pray that it snows tonight.” Well, the father is kind of smug and cynical. He knew how unlikely it was that it would snow in June, in California, even in the mountains. So, he responded, “Okay, you go ahead and pray.” They did. The next morning, they woke up and lo and behold – there was snow all over the ground. The boys were ecstatic. They jumped all around, shouting, “This is unbelievable; we prayed and it snowed.” You can imagine the look on that father’s face.

Later that summer, on another camping trip, the boys thought they’d try it again. “Dear God, please let it snow.” That night it didn’t snow. The father of the boys told me, “I didn’t rain on their parade when it snowed, but when it didn’t snow, I simply said, “Hey, guys, you remember when you prayed earlier in the summer and it snowed?” They said, “Yeah!” “And last night you prayed and it didn’t snow?” They said, “Yeah!” “Well, that’s one you’ll have to figure out.” And they said, “Sure, Dad, that’s really heavy.”

Some day, a long time from now, when those boys pray for something really serious and nothing happens, they might remember that prayer is not magic. Told the truth from the beginning, they might not be confused later. Sometimes God grants us our prayers, and sometimes God doesn’t, and we don’t know why.

When working with high school students on prayer, I like to turn to John Claypool’s incredible book, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*. Claypool writes about his daughter, Laura Lue, who is eight years old and losing the battle with leukemia. Listen to this from the book: “There were times when Laura Lue was hurting so intensely that she had to bite on a rag and used to beg me to pray to God to take away that awful pain. I would kneel down beside her bed and pray with all the faith and conviction of my soul, and nothing would happen except the pain continued to rage on.”

Well, if prayer is not magic, what is it? Prayer is confrontation. Prayer is the frontier where our need and God’s strength meet. It requires no passport or visa. It is the frontier to which we can come in any state of grace or disgrace. In prayer, we come speaking of the trivial; but if we listen, God tells us of the real. Magic refers to all the ways we try to get God to do things our way. Prayer, on the other hand, is acknowledging that God is God. It is a means of discovery – of yourself and your changing relationship with God. Prayer is honest dialogue with God. Prayer is two friends spending time together, enjoying each other’s company, appreciating one another – it is not just a time to get God to act on your agenda or even to tell God what you think God wants to hear.

In his book, *The Saviors of God*, Nikos Kazensakis writes: “My prayer is not the whimpering of a beggar for a confession of love, nor is it the trivial reckoning of a small tradesman: ‘Give me and I shall give you.’ My prayer is the report of a soldier to his general: ‘This is what I did today; this is how I fought to save the entire battle in my own sector; these are the obstacles I found; this is how I plan to fight tomorrow.’” For Kazensakis, prayer is reporting for duty.

After a sermon a couple of months ago, one of you came up to me and thanked me for the message. Then you said, “What I need now is a channel – a way in which I can make the move from believing in Christ to following Jesus.” The channel I would offer, the first step to following Jesus, is to develop a mature prayer life.

Childishness in prayer is chiefly evidenced in an overwhelming desire to beg things from God, and a corresponding failure to desire above all else the friendship of God herself. The same growth ought to take place in our relationship with God which occurs in a normal fellowship between a child and his parents. At first the child wants the parents' gifts, and thinks of the parents largely in terms of the things which they do for his comfort and pleasure. He is not able yet to appreciate the value of the parents' personalities. A sure sign of wholesome maturity, however, is found in the child's deepening understanding of the parents themselves – his increasing delight in their friendship, thankfulness for their care, acceptance of their ideals, reliance on their counsel, and joy in their approval. The child grows through desiring things from his parents into love of his parents, for their own sakes.

Do you remember the several striking changes that take place in the prodigal son between his leaving home and his return? One notable change is that he leaves home saying, "Give me...give me my share of the property." He returns home saying, "Make me...make me one of your hired servants." 'Give me' means that we want God to put something of God's own in our hands for us to use as we see fit. 'Make me' means that we are putting ourselves in God's hands for God to use as God sees fit. What is our intent when we pray? Are we trying to get what we want out of God or are we committing our lives to God?

An old Scottish divine named Dr. Clarke, was known for arising early in the morning to spend time in prayer, meditation, and writing. One of his students, much impressed by Dr. Clarke's habit, but unable to get up early himself, asked the great old man, "Dr. Clarke, what is the secret of your arising so early? How did you develop this discipline? Do you ask God to help you do this? Do you find strength from prayer to do this?"

The venerable divine looked at the student and replied: "No, I just get up!"

**Let us pray:**

Father, we know we are praying most when we are saying least. We know we are closest to you when we leave behind the things that have held us captive so long. Lord, teach us to pray. We would come to you with lists – "Give me this. Give me that." Rather, we would come to you, and ask you to make us servants. Help us to realize that the essential thing in prayer is not what we say to you, but what you say to us and then through us. Amen.