

March 15, 2009

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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### **Learning to Pray II Prayer as Listening**

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Matthew 6:1-18

Several years ago, ABC aired a made-for-television movie called "Pray T.V." The show contrasted the glamour of a media evangelist with the unglamorous, but personal, ministry of a local church. Several days after the broadcast, an article appeared in the television trade magazine Network Star Ledger:

Ned Beatty was acting when he played a television evangelist in ABC's movie, "Pray T.V." Monday night. But, his offer to lend a spiritual ear may have been taken seriously by some of the thousands of folks who called the fictitious preacher's toll-free number.

The telephone company estimates that it received 15,000 calls in the three hours after Beatty's character, The Rev. Freddy Stone, suggested viewers call 800-555-6864, if they had a problem of any kind.

'That number is one of the telephone company's non-working vacant codes, and all such numbers normally could be expected to receive about 900 calls in a three-hour period,' said Harry Schoepe, the telephone company's supervisor for TV network operations. 'But, from 9 to 10 p.m. EST, during the time Stone's appeal was on the air, 10,000 calls to vacant numbers were received. In the next two hours another 5,000 came in.'

Thousands had responded to the offer of a prayer partner - someone who knew how to do it right - to get results. Many may have had already sought God's relief by themselves, but the answer was not the right one or did not come forth quickly enough. They jumped at the chance for spiritual assistance.

I wonder if any of us called? I doubt it. Convincing as the show was, we know a movie isn't real life. And, even if it had been a true evangelist - Billy Graham perhaps - I doubt many of us would pick up the phone. We know enough to realize that everyone has equal access to God's ear. We don't need a prayer partner or a television evangelist or a bishop or the Virgin Mary to intercede for us with God. As Presbyterians, we recognize the priesthood of all believers. Of course, recognizing the priesthood of all believers and praying like a true priest are two different things.

Strangely enough, when we have convinced ourselves of the individual love and care of God, we do not so much evade difficulty as encounter it; for we find ourselves running straight into the arms of one of the most common perplexities concerning prayer.

The obstacle, the real question is this: if God is all wise and all good, why should I try to get God to do things my way? God knows what we need, why tell God what God already knows? God's love seeks the best for us, why beseech God? Rousseau speaks sound sense, doesn't he, when he says:

"I bless God, but I pray not. Why should I ask of him that he would change for me the course of things? I who ought to love, above all, the order established by his wisdom and maintained by his providence, shall I wish that order to be dissolved on my account?"

This objection to prayer is all the stronger because it seems to involve reverence and humility before God. "We will take whatever God sends," says the objector, "We will pray for nothing. We trust God perfectly."

Harry Emerson Fosdick points out in his famous book, *The Meaning of Prayer* that this attitude toward prayer, which insists that because God is infinitely good and wise, therefore prayer is superfluous, rests on several fallacies.

First, such an attitude implies that prayer is an attempt to secure from God by begging, something which God had not at all intended or had intended otherwise; but Christian prayer is never that.

Christian prayer is giving God an opportunity to do what God wants, what God has been trying in vain, perhaps for years to do in our lives, hindered by our unreadiness, our lack of receptivity, our closed hearts and unresponsive minds. True prayer opens the door to the will of God. It does not change God's plan, but it does give God's plan a gangway. It is not begging from God; it is cooperating with God.

Another fallacy underlying the thought that the wisdom and love of God make praying superfluous is the idea that God can do all God wills without any help from us. God cannot. Experience is clear. There are some things God can never do until God finds a person who prays. Meister Eckhart, the mystic, puts that truth with extreme boldness. He says, "God can as little do without us, as we without God." Or listen to the words of Antonio Stradivarius, the famous maker of violins:

"When any master holds 'Twixt chin and hand a violin of mine', he will be glad that Stradivarius lived, made violins, and made them the best.... For while God gives them skill, I give them instruments to

play upon, God choosing me to help him.... If my hand slacked I should rob God...leaving a blank instead of violins." God could not make Antonio Stradivarius' violins without Antonio.

Just as God depends on the work of servants to get things done, God depends on prayer. Prayer is one of the ways we cooperate with God.

Perhaps our strongest misconception concerning prayer is that it consists chiefly in our talking to God. The best and most neglected part of prayer is our listening to God.

I remember a frustrating conversation in the summer of 1968 between my father and me. That summer I was between my junior and senior year in college. I was enrolled in Army ROTC. I had just completed 8 weeks of intensive training at Indiantown Gap Military Reservation, and was questioning my role in the Army. The Viet Nam War was at its peak and so were its protest movements. When we did drill on Mondays at Lehigh University jogging in formation through the campus, some of my friends would actually spit on us.

While I wasn't ready to pack my bags for Canada or Sweden like some of my classmates, I was truly concerned. I wondered what I would do 12 months hence if I were given orders for Viet Nam as a newly commissioned Second Lieutenant. I wasn't sure that the war was justified, and I certainly wasn't prepared to shoot people over a civil disagreement I couldn't really understand.

I remember seeking out my father for advice. I remember the tremendous frustration I had at not being able to communicate my ambivalent feelings. My father had been one of the youngest majors in the Second World War. He was a major at 24, I think. While no one loves war, his experience in the Army had been highly positive and educational - had made him grow and mature as a young adult. In the conversation he was unable to hear my hesitations about the Army and Viet Nam. Instead of listening he went into his familiar litany of how a military experience builds strength and character, which is true, I suppose, but not what I was after.

When I was writing this sermon this week, I thought of that ineffective conversation - about how frustrating it was for me. I just wanted to be heard. I thought about that and I wondered. I wondered if God isn't frustrated at me in the same way when I come to him in prayer. God just wants to be heard. I'm so ready to tell God what I want: I'm so ready to tell God what I think would be best for me, for my family, for this church, for the United States. When I pray, I'm so ready to speak - and so unable to listen, to really hear. You see, the purpose of all prayer is to find God's will and to make that will our prayer.

Over and over, the Psalms, the prayer book of the Bible, tries to tell us that in true prayer, listening is just as important as talking:

Psalm 62, "For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him."

Psalm 85, "Let me hear what God the Lord will speak."

Psalm 37, "Be silent to God and let him mold thee."

And the one which we read responsively together this morning: Psalm 46, "Be still and know that I am God."

Let's face it, if you are at all like me, in your prayer life you seldom listen. I hammer so busily that the architect cannot discuss the plans with me. I am so preoccupied with the activities of sailing, that I don't take my bearings from the sky. When the spirit, when Christ himself stands at the door and

knocks, the bustle of the household drowns out the sound of his knocking. God has had a hard time even to get in a word edgewise; and in lives so conducted, there are some things which God herself, with all her wisdom and goodwill, cannot do.

Even a casual study of the effective servants of the world reveals how much of their vision and stimulus came in quiet and receptive hours. Prayer gave God the opportunity to speak, for praying is the listening ear. Jesus said, “. . . your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8). Just because of God’s perfect knowledge and love, Jesus seems to say, pray with confidence. Do not think that you can add to God’s information about your need or can inspire in God an increased goodwill by your petition. You cannot. God knows your need in advance and is more willing to give than you are to take. But, one thing you can do. You can open the way for God to do what God wants to do. Prayer cannot change God’s purpose, but prayer can release it. God cannot do for the woman with the closed heart what God can do for the woman with the open heart. You can give God a chance to work God’s will in and for and through you. Prayer is simply giving the wise and good God an opportunity to do what God’s wisdom and love want done.

So, we have, two fundamentally opposed ideas of prayer; one, that by begging we may change the will of God and curry favor or win gifts by coaxing; the other, that prayer is offering God the opportunity to say to us, to give to us, to do through us what God wills. Only one of these is Christian.

God had long intended Isaiah to be his prophet. When Isaiah said, “Here am I, send me,” he did not alter in the least the divine purpose, but he did release it.

God had long intended Africa should be evangelized. When Livingston cried, “O God, help me to paint this Dark Continent white,” he did not alter God’s intention, but he did alter God’s action. Power broke loose that before had been pent up; the cooperation of a person’s prayer, backed by that person’s life, opened a way for the divine purpose. God long wanted America to desegregate, but it didn’t happen until Martin Luther King, Jr. asked God for guidance and courage for that incredible battle. There was an invasion of the world by God through Isaiah and Livingston and King.

Who knows what power will be broken loose through your prayer today?

Let us pray:

O Lord, our God, teach us to pray. Open our ears to your will. Work out your divine purpose through us. Amen.