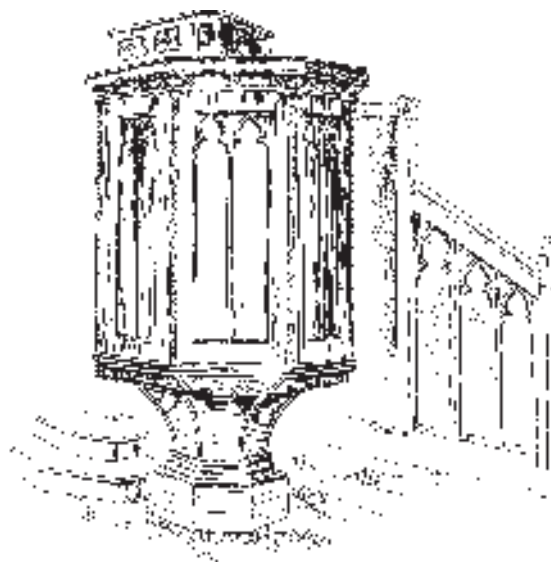


April 5, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Nevertheless

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Matthew 21:1-11
Matthew 26:36-46

“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; *yet* not what I want but what you want” (Matthew 26:39).

This Lent we have been on a spiritual journey of prayer. A couple hundred of us made Lenten stewardship commitments of prayer. Many of us have used devotional guides. We have investigated different kinds of prayer in class and in worship. We have prayed together on Sunday mornings and some of us coupled together as prayer partners. And now Holy Week is upon us.

We come to Gethsemane. Here Jesus prays a one sentence prayer that stands as an incredible example of what we have been trying to learn about prayer during Lent.

“He said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I go over there to pray.’” First, Jesus reminds us of the need for a time and a place set apart for prayer.

Choose a place and time where you will pray each day, preferably in the morning when you are fresh and alert. If you live alone, finding a place may be relatively easy. If you live with even one other person, it may be difficult. Search for your sacred space. Find it. Claim it. Some solitude and quiet were

essential for Jesus at Gethsemane and it will be for you as well, if you are to succeed in this ongoing inner journey.

Your sacred space needs to fit your unique needs. I heard of someone who prays in the laundry room every day. I know someone who sings Gregorian chants with a tape each day as he drives to work. (No, it's not John Neely.) Many find a corner in the bedroom. Some choose their office or den. Wherever it might be, find the place and let it become *your* Gethsemane.

So... space *and* time, too. I hope you will find at least 20 minutes a day to pray. Of course that means making choices, setting priorities – perhaps less TV or fewer phone conversations or less computer time. On the other hand, this idea of praying every day is not meant to induce guilt. On the days you can't complete, or maybe even begin your prayer time, let it go and continue the next day.

You are not alone if you find it frustrating and difficult to have the discipline, the desire or the time for prayer. Our culture encourages busyness, not silence; activity, not quiet; extroversion, not introversion.

Even on those days when you feel blah, restless, doubtful, stressed, or empty be sure to stay with it; especially, on those days. This is often the time when the seeds of growth are germinating.

Jesus begins his Gethsemane prayer this way, "My Father..." it is a familiar personal way of addressing God and it reminds us that in prayer we learned this Lent to think of God as our friend. Prayer is spending time with a friend.

Prayer is an act of self expression, of getting close—for example, "God feel the throbbing in my left knee." It sometimes helps to be specific, like you would be when talking to a friend. Not, "God here's my pain," but "God feel the throbbing in my left knee." Prayer is basically getting in touch with God and letting God get in touch with you.

When you fall in love, you don't think first of all, "I want to ask that person for something." You simply want to be with that person—to feel what each other feels. You want to spend time with that person. Prayer is spending time with your friend, God. That's the essence of prayer.

Next, for the prayer itself—"If it is possible let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want." What honesty; what candor; what self-definition.

If you and I were conversing—friend to friend—I wouldn't expect you to give me all the answers to my problems. I'd like you to give me a ready ear. I'd like to feel that you heard me. That's what one can hope and expect from God. That's what Jesus prayed when he said, "If it is possible let this cup pass from me..." He didn't think God was necessarily going to let that happen, but he was expressing his desire—honestly and openly.

It was a perfect prayer: "If it is possible let this cup pass from me; *but, yet, nevertheless*—not what I want, what you want." My Father, if there is any way; get me out of this mess. *But, yet, nevertheless*, please, not what I want. You, what do you want?

Do you feel it—the dependence on God? Prayer is profound acceptance—profound dependence. George Harris, the former editor of *Psychology Today*, while in combat in World War II when he was going out on reconnaissance, and was not sure he was coming back, started using a repetitive prayer. "Not my will but thine." The capacity to give yourself to another reality other than your own is essential

for any religious experience. One has to start there.

Prayer if it is real is an acknowledgment of our finitude, our need, our openness to be changed, our readiness to be surprised, even astonished by the Other, who is beyond us, yet as near as the air we breathe.

Did you notice that Jesus prays his prayer three times? Why do you suppose he did that? Was there a bad connection that day? Hey, God, can you hear me now?

I don't know, but I like to think that he repeated himself not because he was afraid God didn't hear the first time, but because he needed time to listen for God's response. If there was a bad connection, it was from God to Jesus. Jesus is completely open and perfectly dependent, but he wants to be sure of God's response. He takes time to listen, which in the end is probably the hardest part about prayer—listening for the still small voice. When he senses it, Jesus acts. He turns to his disciples and says, "Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

- What a teaching on prayer!
- Jesus set a place apart to pray
- He set a time apart
- He saw God as friend
- He was open and honest
- Yet, he showed he was dependent on God
- He listened for God's response
- And then he acted.

Matthew 26:36-46 Message Bible

Then Jesus told them, "Before the night's over, you're going to fall to pieces because of what happens to me. There is a Scripture that says, 'I'll strike the shepherd; helter-skelter the sheep will be scattered. But after I am raised up, I, your Shepherd, will go ahead of you, leading the way to Galilee.'

Peter broke in, "Even if everyone else falls to pieces on account of you, I won't."

"Don't be so sure," Jesus said. "This very night, before the rooster crows up the dawn, you will deny me three times."

Peter protested, "Even if I had to die with you, I would never deny you." All the others said the same thing.

Then Jesus went with them to a garden called Gethsemane and told his disciples, "Stay here while I go over there and pray." Taking along Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he plunged into an agonizing sorrow. Then he said, "This sorrow is crushing my life out. Stay here and keep vigil with me."

Going a little ahead, he fell on his face, praying, "My Father, if there is any way, get me out of this. But please, not what I want. You, what do you want?"

When he came back to his disciples, he found them sound asleep. He said to Peter, "Can't you stick it out with me a single hour? Stay alert; be in prayer so you don't wander into temptation without even

knowing you're in danger. There is a part of you that is eager, ready for anything in God. But there's another part that's as lazy as an old dog sleeping by the fire."

He then left them a second time. Again he prayed, "My Father, if there is no other way than this, drinking this cup to the dregs, I'm ready. Do it your way."

When he came back, he again found them sound asleep. They simply couldn't keep their eyes open. This time he let them sleep on, and went back a third time to pray, going over the same ground one last time.

When he came back the next time, he said, "Are you going to sleep on and make a night of it? My time is up, the Son of Man is about to be handed over to the hands of sinners. Get up! Let's get going! My betrayer is here."