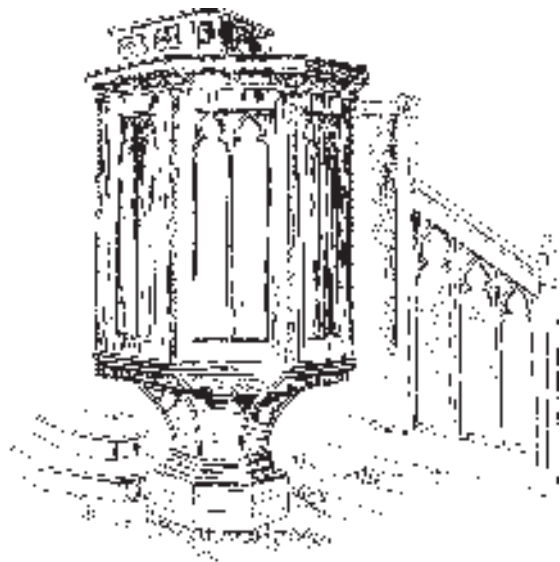


June 20, 2010

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Is Prayer a Waste of Time?

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Luke 11:9

You make a wish when you blow out the candles on your birthday cake, but you don't really expect your wish to come true. If you are a golfer you might have a special token to mark your ball on the putting surface, but you know it won't lower your handicap. When you pass by a wishing well you throw a few coins in, but you do it only to get rid of the loose change in your pockets. You don't expect a miracle to happen.

Is prayer any different? Do you expect something to happen, or is it just a quaint ritual that you do without any expectation of results?

Is Prayer a Waste of Time? I trust that you won't be surprised when I tell you, "No, I don't think prayer is a waste of time." After all it *is* Sunday morning and we *are* at church. But, you may be surprised at **why** I think prayer is not a waste of time.

Most of us are getting very dependent on the Internet. How much time do you spend on the internet each week? It must be at least five hours a week for me. Why are we so interested in surfing the net? Basically, it's so we can get stuff: news and information mostly. But, some folks also go to the Web to shop for clothes or entertainment or books or other stuff.

The internet is an impersonal force. It has no personality and no ability to do anything apart from those people who input and respond to information and requests. That's exactly how many people view God – an impersonal force who exists for us to input information and make requests. They treat God like a Web site, and prayer is like an internet connection they use to get the stuff they want.

I guess I don't have to tell you (but I will anyway), God is a whole lot more than a Web site, and prayer is much more than an impersonal connection.

If you've been treating prayer like it's some kind of an internet connection, don't despair. We've all been there and it certainly isn't a bad idea to reach out to God in times of trouble.

All of us from time to time - usually when we are at our wits end or we think we really need something – all of us have treated God like some kind of information highway genie who doesn't do a thing until we rub the magic lamp called prayer. Still, prayer isn't a technique to get God to do things our way. God is not a Web site that you can click onto to get the stuff you want.

It's true that God answers prayer, but God's answer may not come immediately; and it might not be the answer you were hoping for. *Your* timing may not be *God's* timing. Some of your requests may not be answered at all – which is a good thing. Let me say that another way. Sure, God answers prayer. Sometimes the answer is “yes;” sometimes the answer is “later;” and sometimes the answer is “no.” And, that “no” is often a good thing. Garth Brooks had it right when he sang, “I thank God for unanswered prayer.” The point is, prayer is more than some neat way to manipulate God and control our world.

Way back in the third century, Clement of Alexandria defined prayer as: “Conversation with God.” *Prayer is simply talking to a personal God, who loves you and knows what's best for you.*

The great London preacher from a generation ago, Leslie Weatherhead, said, “I find that I don't pray for things. This is not humility or superiority. It must be right for a child to tell his father what he wants. It is just that I feel God knows that already and that wordless communion, say during a lonely walk along the shore, gets me further. At the same time I want to make progress in praying, and perhaps we can assess whether we are moving forward if our prayer moves from saying to God, ‘Give me’ to ‘Make me,’ and then to ‘Show me,’ and finally to ‘Use me.’”

In his famous book, *The Meaning of Prayer*, Harry Emerson Fosdick says that, “The essence of prayer is communion. Prayer is no cure-all or certain way of obtaining what we desire. For example, God will not allow us to dispense with medical research by putting a 25-cent prayer in the slot, as it were, and drawing out a cure. If I get appendicitis I hope they will send for a surgeon rather than a bishop! If I were drowning, I would rather see on the shore a burglar who could swim than a minister who couldn't.”

The movie, *Shadowlands*, portrays the true story of joy and pain of the relationship between C.S. Lewis (played by Anthony Hopkins) and American writer Joy Gresham (played by Debra Winger). A growing friendship between them led to a marriage of convenience. C. S. Lewis wed the single mother in a secret civil ceremony so that Joy could gain English citizenship. Eventually it was discovered that Joy had terminal cancer, and by that time Lewis realized that he really did love her.

Joy's cancer went into temporary remission, and for a season she and Lewis experienced the depth of committed Christian married love. During this time, an Anglican priest talked with Lewis about prayer. In their conversation, we hear a mature description of how prayer works and why it isn't a waste of time.

In the movie the priest says, "I know how hard you've been praying. And now God is answering your prayer."

Lewis responded, "That's not why I pray, Harry. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time – waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God; it changes me."

Florence Alshorn describes prayer as sitting "quietly before God doing nothing, only fixing the will gently on some expressive phrase like... 'Father, here am I and here are you.'" She likens this to lying in the sun and surrendering one's body to it and she believes one is affected spiritually at the center of one's being, just as by sheer, relaxed surrender, the sun changes the color of the skin.

Frederick Buechner says, "Everybody prays whether you think of it as praying or not. The odd silence you fall into when something very beautiful is happening or something very good or very bad. The ah-h-h-h! that sometimes floats up out of you as out of a Fourth of July crowd when the sky-rocket bursts over the water. The stammer of pain at somebody else's pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else's joy. Whatever words or sounds you use for sighing over the events and worries of your life, these are all prayers in their way. These are all spoken not just to yourself, but to something even more familiar than yourself."

According to our scripture lesson today, Jesus says, by far the most important thing about praying is to keep at it. The God you call upon will finally come, and even if God does not bring you the answer you want, God will bring you himself. And at the secret heart of all our prayers, that is, I think, what we are really praying for anyway.

So...keep knocking at the door. Keep the lines of communication open. Not because you have to beat a path to God's door before God will open it, but because until you beat the path, maybe there's no way of getting to your door.

Perhaps the quote on the front of today's bulletin says it best. "Prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God's gift of himself." *That's another reason why prayer is not a waste of time, because it enlarges the heart until it's capable of containing God.* Prayer doesn't change God, it changes you and it enlarges your heart until its capable of containing God.

I recall a conversation I once had with a spiritual mentor many years ago while in seminary. He asked me, "How is your friendship with God going?" I wasn't sure what he meant, so he continued.

He said, "What I really want to know is, what kind of quality time do you spend alone with God every day? What are you two working on together?"

I looked puzzled. He pressed me further.

"How well do you and God honestly share your feelings? What kind of time do you waste every day with God? How do the two of you express intimacy? What experiences have you shared lately? What have you heard God saying?"

It was then that I realized that I had always talked about God as if God were a friend, but I had never treated God like one.

Let us pray: O God, who gave us birth, you are ever more ready to hear than we are to pray. You know our needs before we ask, and our ignorance in asking. Help us to expand our prayer life beyond a wish list and help us to see you as the loving friend you have shown us you are in Jesus Christ. Amen.