

“The Praying Life”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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1 Timothy 2: 1-7

Dave Monesmith sent me these two vignettes a couple of years ago, which might give you a laugh when thinking about prayer.

“The preacher’s 5-year-old daughter noticed that her father always paused and bowed his head for a moment before starting his sermon. One day, she asked him why. ‘Well, honey,’ he began, proud that his daughter was so observant of his messages. ‘I’m asking the Lord to help me preach a good sermon.’ To which his daughter replied: ‘How come He doesn’t answer it?’”

“Little Johnny and his family were having Sunday dinner at his grandmother’s house. Everyone was seated around the table as the food was being served. When Little Johnny received his plate, he started eating right away. ‘Johnny! Please wait until we say our prayer,’ said his mother. ‘I don’t need to,’ the boy replied. ‘Of course, you do,’ his mother insisted. ‘We always say a prayer before eating at our house.’ ‘That’s at our house,’ Johnny explained. ‘But this is Grandma’s house and she knows how to cook.’”

Through the eyes of children, we can laugh at these examples about prayer. But they also point to our motivations and our expectations when it comes to prayer.

So, what do you pray for? Do you pray for good health and job security? Do you pray for family and friends who are sick? Do you pray for the meal that is placed in front of you, and the hands that have prepared it? Do you pray for yourself, for others, for the world? What do you pray for?

When do you pray? Every night? Every morning? Once a week? On a consistent basis? When you’re facing a crisis? Hardly ever?

How do you pray? Do you use lots of words, and let the stream of consciousness just pour forth? Do you take your time, choosing your words carefully and deliberately? Do you pray in silence, or do you speak out loud? Do you sing your prayer, or pray in another active manner?

What are we doing when we pray? Are we waiting for a response from God to our petitions? Are we letting off some steam from our stressful lives? Are we praying for just the people we want to pray for, or are we praying for all the people we need to pray for? What are we really doing when we pray?

Eugene Boring writes, *Prayer is theology; theology is prayer.* Karl Barth rightly affirmed, “The first and basic act of theological work is

prayer.” Prayer is a theological act, the fundamental theological act. What one prays for simultaneously shapes and expresses one’s theology . . . Prayer is theology.

It is less often seen that theology is prayer . . . Barth’s point is that theological work itself, struggling to discern the contemporary meaning of God’s revelatory self-disclosure (in Jesus Christ) – such theological struggle is itself prayer, wrestling with the angel until the blessing comes, even if one goes limping away (Genesis 32). Consider the rabbinic saying: “An hour of study is in the eyes of the Holy One, blessed be He, as an hour of prayer” (New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 8, Abingdon Press, Nashville, ©1995: 206).

This passage from 1 Timothy challenges us to consider our prayer life, both in terms of who we pray for and how we are to lead lives of prayer. For once we recognize that prayer is not about us but is about God, then we see the power of prayer in the world around us – near and far, familiar and foreign, grace-filled and transformative.

The church of 1 Timothy was in a much different situation than what we know as 21st-century Christians. We are blessed with the freedom to worship without persecution, without the fear of being ostracized for witnessing our faith. In Timothy’s time, the church was new and was in a definite minority. They were persecuted for proclaiming Jesus Christ as God’s revelation to the world. No one would have blamed them if they had chosen to live as an isolated, withdrawn community to avoid this daily burden of discipleship.

But that is not what they desired, and that is not what is encouraged to them in this pastoral letter. “First of all, I urge that prayers be made for everyone,” including kings and all who are in power (2:1-2). Instead of withdrawing, the church is called to embrace the world in prayer, “so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity” (2:2). For as the hands and feet of God, the church is called to embody God’s will and desire for the world. “This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2:3-4).

Consider that statement if you were hearing it as a persecuted Christian in Timothy’s church. “God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Even those who persecute me? Even those who taunt me because of my faith? Even the rulers of my city or region who make my life intolerable as a member of a minority faith? The church was supposed to pray for all these people, because that is God’s hope and desire for the world: that all might come to believe in his truth.

For that truth is found in the one embodiment of God’s love for the world: Jesus Christ. When the church prays for everyone, as it is called to do in verse one, its prayers are heard and mediated by the one “who gave himself a ransom for all:” Jesus Christ (2:6). Just as “there is

one God, there is also one mediator between God and humankind:" Jesus Christ. No matter the struggle, no matter the strife, no matter the persecution, the church is to pray for all, for God has given his only son for all the world - and it is through him that every prayer is heard.

And yet, does that really change our perspective on prayer? It's a struggle for me just to keep in prayer those people in my life who I know are sick, are struggling, and I WANT to pray for. Now, I'm supposed to also pray for those who work against me, who are way on the other side of the world, who I would label my enemy? Seriously? When will I see some results in my prayer life, God? When will I see you mediating for me?

Geoffrey Hoare writes: *I was busy whining to a friend about how boring I was finding prayer and how it seemed to be a waste of time. After a while he looked at me and he asked whether I did not know that I was to look for the effects of prayer in my life and not in the prayer itself. He was spot on. I was hoping for an experience of the nearer presence of God. I was praying with the hope that I would somehow know the presence of Christ in a particular way. I was not so much praying in order to offer and open myself to God. I was praying in order to get something, almost to conjure up a gift. And you know what? It wasn't working. Those wonderful sublime foretastes of the Kingdom of God that we are sometimes granted in prayer are gifts of grace, sheer grace - nothing more, nothing less. We can no more manipulate a gift than we can fashion the divine will to be in accord with ours in any other way.*

For me this was a stunning revelation that allowed my expectations of prayer to become once again about allowing God to work in my life rather than seeking a particular gift for my own gratification. Nowadays I am much more aware that when I am finding myself particularly anxious about work or money or some important relationship or other, I become particularly aware there is a good chance that I have not been paying attention to my prayers. I look for the effect of my prayer in life and that itself is a gift of grace for which I am especially grateful.

What I came to realize after some months is something that many Christians seem to know by intuition, and that is that intercession and petition are not matters of cause and effect, not a straightforward mechanism, not a matter of putting in a request to God and having it answered depending on whether or not God is having a good day. In the economy of God these prayers are rather more like throwing a stone into a pond and watching the ripples affect the whole environment. I came to realize that things do not happen in the world because I pray. But things do happen in the world when I pray. I am changed as I discover the deepest desires of my heart and the world is changed in some way to do with the might and majesty and mystery of the One

who made us, the source of light and life, the ground of our being, the lover of our souls who brings universes into being. This realization has allowed me to pray again such that today intercession and petition have become the heart of my own prayer life. (<http://day1.org/1075-intercession>).

When our focus changes from what will benefit us in prayer, to what God will do through our prayers, then we understand the praying life that 1 Timothy speaks of. When we shift our expectations from waiting for our result to waiting for God's impact, then we shift our maturity in faith to a new level. When we engage our mediator in prayer, knowing that through him all things are indeed possible, then we fall in concert with God our Savior, "who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

Last Sunday, we had a glorious day. Over 160 people came to church, and of those, 29 people indicated they were visitors or first-time guests. That's about 20% of our attendance. Do you believe that was solely the result of your effort and your words to invite someone new to church? Or do you believe that through prayer, God touched the heart of your friend or family member, to be receptive to your invitation, and to give you the courage to speak to them? Do we have the faith to see God's might and influence in our lives, through the dedicated, consistent, joyful lives of prayer that we lead?

We may not always see the results of our prayers turn out the way we wish. There will still be suffering and pain and death and confusion and waywardness for those we love, and for those we do not know. Yet when our lives of prayer are focused not on the anticipated result, but on the ways God will impact our lives, then we recognize God's power and might impacting the world, like a pebble thrown into a lake, and the ripples that emanate from it.

As we seek to lead a praying life, may we be strengthened and encouraged by the fact that all of our prayers are received by the one who gave himself for all the world. And in so doing, we are brought closer to the mystery of our God, whose sole desire is that all might know the love God has for this world in Jesus Christ his Son.

Thanks be to God. Amen.