

## **“Prayer as An Attitude”**

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
May 9, 2010*

*Acts 16:9-15, John 14:23-29*

Our first scripture passage for today comes from the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John. The 13<sup>th</sup> through the 17<sup>th</sup> chapters of John show us Jesus in the upper room with his disciples on the night before his arrest. At the beginning of chapter 13, after Jesus washes their feet, he launches into what is basically an extended monologue with an occasional interruption from the disciples (For instance, Thomas asking, after Jesus asserts, “*You know the way to the place where I am going*” “We don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Or Philip responding, after Jesus claims, “*No one comes to the Father but by me.*” “Show us the Father and we will be satisfied.”) The passage I am about to read is Jesus’ answer to a question that Judas (not Judas Iscariot, but the other Judas) asks Jesus, “How is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?” Listen now for the way Jesus responds to his question. *Read John here.*

Our second reading is from the book of Acts of the Apostles. The passage begins with the apostle Paul having a vision of a man from Macedonia asking for help. When talking about how Paul responds to the vision, Luke, the author of Acts, moves into the first person plural, saying, “We immediately tried to cross over.” When you hear that move to the first person plural, you should know that Luke is a companion of Paul’s on the journey.

When they enter Philippi, which is a Roman colony, note there is no mention of a synagogue. Scholars suggest this is because there were not enough Jewish males, or enough Jewish males organized there, to form a synagogue. They needed to have at least ten. So Paul and Luke and their entourage go someplace where they suppose they might find a place of prayer - down by the river. There they encounter Lydia, who was a businesswoman, a dealer in purple cloth - probably a wealthy woman. Luke calls her a worshiper of God, which meant that she was a Gentile who prayed to the God of Israel, but had not yet converted to become a Jew. Pay attention to how Lydia responds to Paul and his message. *Read Acts here.*

Lately, I’ve been thinking a lot about prayer: how it works, what it finally accomplishes, and why we bother going about it in the first place. Maybe you’ve asked yourself the same sort of questions.

Such questions often arise around intercessory or imprecatory prayer - the prayers we lift to God on behalf of others or ourselves asking for particular outcomes - healing from disease, or a lighter sentence for someone we love, admission to a certain school, or employment in a particular job. They come up when we hear tales of prayers answered in remarkable ways and then remember how some other prayers don’t result in the outcomes we so desperately sought.

Just last Sunday, for instance, we heard about the elderly father of one of our members coming out of a coma from which almost no one expected him to emerge. One of the nurses told the family, “This is evidence that there is something at work here beyond what medicine can explain.” I agree with that. But I also wonder. Why did Donald Thomas experience healing, while other, younger people for whom we prayed - perhaps even more earnestly because they were younger - succumbed to cancer?

I'm not sure there are any satisfying answers to that question. It is not helpful and, more importantly, I believe strongly that **it is not accurate** and furthermore, it is mean-spirited to tell someone that the reason their prayers were not answered in the way they wanted is that they didn't pray in the right fashion or with enough faith. I just don't believe that praying to God is like putting coins in a vending machine, as if you simply insert enough trust, you will get the outcome you desire. I know from hard experience that prayer doesn't work that way.

So how does prayer work? What is it about after all? I think our passage from Acts gives us a clue. In it we meet Lydia, a businesswoman, a seller of purple goods. She and some other women are in Philippi and they have gathered at the river to pray.

As I visualize that scene this morning, something in me can't help but think of the stirring music from the baptismal scene in the movie *O Brother Where Art Thou*. Do you remember the song that was being sung at the river? "As I went down in the river to pray, studying about that good old way and who shall wear the robe and crown, good Lord, show me the way. O sisters let's go down, let's go down, won't you come on down? O sisters let's go down, down in the river to pray."

Now who knows exactly what Lydia and her sisters were praying, but they were in a place of prayer. They were waiting for God to show them the way. And that's when Paul and Luke show up and the text says, "The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul."

Let me say three things about that. First, to be in a place of prayer isn't necessarily about being in a particular geographic location, although geographical locations can serve to help facilitate prayer. For many of us, this sanctuary, with its beautiful architecture - its simplicity, the way it allows light to stream in, the manner in which it creates a sense of intimacy not just with God but with the gathered community of faith, truly serves as a place of prayer. It has a way of drawing us in to the presence of God.

Other people may be more drawn into God's presence in a massive stone cathedral built to emphasize God's majesty and transcendence. Still others may feel closer to God on the beach, hearing the waves crashing against the shore and looking out across a vast expanse of ocean. The mountains are a particularly holy place for others - and those of us who have been on retreat at Massanetta Springs and Montreat can testify that the backdrop of the Shenandoah or the Blue Ridge mountains can serve to help draw us into God's presence.

It doesn't matter where you and I happen to be physically. We may not always be present emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. I think all of us have had the experience of being in a church setting and not really being engaged. It could be happening to you right now! The cares and concerns of life wear on us, the little distractions pull our attention away from what is being said or sung, we're thinking about our respective "to-do" lists.

In my first congregation, there was a gentleman, a truly likeable guy, who sat up near the front nearly every Sunday. His head was always down throughout the sermon. I thought, "Well there are a couple of things that might be going on here. Number one, he might be asleep. Number two, he might be taking notes (by the way, that is the Presbyterian way of saying Amen)." So I approached his significant other, Linda, who was the Clerk of our Session. I said, "Linda, what is going on with Bill? His head is always down during my sermon." She replied, "Oh, he's doing the Word Jumble in the paper. That's his time to do the Word Jumble." Now to be fair to Bill, he could tell you what I said in the sermon almost verbatim every week. But I have to say, watching him with his head down, was always a little disconcerting for me when I was preaching!

The second point I would make (and I think the text makes) is that to be in a place of prayer is not so much about where we are physically, it is about whether or not we are present to the moment and how God might be addressing us in the moment.

In that first church I served, part of my responsibility to the presbytery was to moderate the Session of another church in town as they looked for a new pastor. The process took more than two years. So I came to know the people in that congregation very well. When they finally called a new pastor, they asked me to preach for his installation service. I prepared a special sermon for the occasion. Because I didn't want to write two sermons that week, I thought, "Well, I'll just use the installation sermon and adapt it a little bit for the Sunday morning service at my own church. Then I'll preach it at the other church for the installation in the afternoon." So that Sunday morning came, and I preached the sermon for the people in my home congregation, and it fell flat. I mean, "**Thud!**" And I thought, "O God! What am I going to do? There's an installation this afternoon. I can't preach something that is just going to die." I didn't have time to scrap the whole thing and compose something new. So I pulled it together and about 4:00 that afternoon I stood up in the pulpit. When I preached that sermon, the atmosphere was electric. People were laughing at every laugh line, they were taking notes, they were even saying "Amen" (in a Presbyterian church!). What was the difference? We were all present to the moment. We were in a place of prayer.

That's the second point in a nutshell. To be in a place of prayer is to put yourself in a position to have your heart opened and touched. The text says that the Lord opened Lydia's heart. That's good Reformed Theology by the way. In Reformed Theology, faith itself is a gift of God's grace. It is not something that we gin up, it is something that God gives us. Faith does not come about through our initiative, it comes about through God's initiative. That's why we baptize infants, by the way.

But we are not simply passive recipients in the process. We can put ourselves in a position to have our hearts touched. We can engage in disciplines that can nurture our souls, we can be in groups that provide us with opportunities to learn and grow, we can come to worship, we can be about prayer. We have a role to play in God opening our hearts.

Presumably, up until the point Lydia heard Paul, her heart wasn't fully open. But Lydia was there, she was in prayer, she was present to the moment, and something happened to open her up. Something happened to take whatever was closing her, and break it open, so that she could really hear and experience the love of God addressed to her.

The third thing I want to say is that evidence of an open heart is seen in open hands and open homes. Furthermore, I think that prayer is not finally about getting what we want. It is about God working through us to accomplish what God wants, which is openness, love and the fruit of the Spirit.

We don't know whether Lydia was a mother, but we do know that she had a home and she opened it to Paul. She prevailed upon him to stay with her and receive her hospitality. I read somewhere this week that not many people were able to really prevail upon Paul, but she did.

Since it is Mother's Day, let me share with you a story about a couple I married in the church I served in North Carolina. They were lovely people, well matched for each other. Like too many couples, they had a difficult time getting pregnant. If there is any reason to reject the idea that God answers our prayers based on the amount of trust we have, it is the issue of infertility. These two people prayed and prayed to have a child. It didn't happen. There were a number of pregnancies that ended far before they came to term. They could have given up and become bitter.

Here were two people of faith who prayed hard for a child. And I prayed with them. But even in consultation with fertility doctors, no child came. So Christal and Patric, I learned through the miracle of Facebook, decided to become foster parents. They have just taken in their second foster child, a baby girl. I think about how the two of them could have been bitter about not having a biological child, but instead they have been open to letting God use them in this way.

One of the privileges of being a pastor in this congregation is to attend committee meetings and to hear someone share a devotional relating how they are growing spiritually. I wasn't at the Worship Committee meeting last month to hear this devotional, but here is a piece of it, which I think speaks to prayer. One of our members wrote this:

*It seems God is educating me. I am moving toward a belief that God, the center of all Being, wants us to be in connection with God. That is the tide that pulls my prayer, which underlies the rhythm of life, which nurtures the Holy inside me. I am reminded of Bono's admonition that he/we seek not to convince God of what we will but to get ourselves in harmony with God's will. I am not so much directing prayer from myself toward God as being led out of myself and into God.<sup>1</sup>*

That's beautiful.

We still have this little issue of results, though. And I have been wrestling with how prayer doesn't always achieve the outcomes we want. I wrote about it in our most recent Presbytery newsletter. At the end of the article, after I acknowledged that I prayed for a number of things that never came to pass, this is what I wrote:

*But I am not going to stop praying. Do you know why? Because I think prayer is fundamentally not about results, it is about relationship. Relationships thrive only when there is communication. Think about it. In a good relationship, partners share their joys and concerns with each other. They tell each other what is important to them, what they want and need. And sometimes they express their disappointment and frustration with each other.*

*This is what makes the Psalms such an important resource in the life of faith, by the way. They give us the tools to express not just our gratitude and adoration, but also our complaints and longings. The Psalms remind us that it is possible to stay connected to God through the times of disappointment, to hang on until mourning gets turned into dancing again. The Psalms show us that people of faith don't always have their prayers answered in the way they would like. They might even show us that prayer isn't so much about us getting something out of God as it is about God being relationship with us, even when we don't get what we want. That was enough for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. And here and there and now and then, it is enough for me.<sup>2</sup>*

In Jesus' name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>1</sup> This is from Martha Whitney's devotional at the April Worship Committee meeting.

<sup>2</sup> This is from the article I wrote for the May issue of the NCP Monthly, National Capital Presbytery's on line newsletter.