

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
LAITY SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“WHY DO WE PRAY?”
LUKE 18:1-8
October 17, 2010
9:00 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES

Jesus taught his disciples the necessity of praying without losing heart. It's not that such prayer finally wears down the resistance of God to our prayers. Rather, praying without losing heart keeps us open to the sources of strength that are only available through prayer.

Prayer does not automatically produce results. Prayers are as diverse as the people who pray. The same words may be sincere in the prayer of one person that are calculating in the prayer of another. No matter what words we use in prayer, and no matter how impressive we think we are, God always hears the prayer of the heart.

In all of nature, there is only one animal that prays and that is man. Anthropologists have taken note of that fact. They see in prayer the distinguishing feature that sets human being apart from all other forms of animal life. They base this claim on the fact that prayer is a universal constant found in every culture, ancient and modern.

Do you ever wonder why people pray? Sometimes it doesn't seem to help. And at other times, it does. I have prayed for many sick people. Some of them have recovered from their illnesses and been restored to active and healthy lives. But others of them have stayed sick, gotten worse, and eventually died. I do not know which result is more prevalent. I have not kept score. I have no proof that prayer for the sick really **“works”**. But I still do it, and so do you. But Why?

We pray for all kinds of things with doubtful results. World peace, for example! I have prayed for that all my life. And the ensuing years have produced countless conflicts, and a few major wars. I have prayed for the poor as long as I can remember. But I have seen no evidence that my prayers have improved the

plight of the poor. For all I know, we may have more poor people now than we had when I started. Yet I continue to pray for the poor. But Why?

Answers to that question are many and varied for all of us. One of the reasons we pray is because it was part of our rearing. From early childhood we were taught little prayers. And we can still remember some of them: **“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”** We pray because we have been taught to pray. Sometimes we pray out of a sense of duty. As Christians we have an obligation to pray. And so we do. But I think the main reason most of us pray is because we can’t help it. We want something to happen. With all of our hearts, we hope that it will. That is prayer in its most genuine form.

The Gospel reading this morning gives us an insight into why Jesus prayed. He spoke of it as a necessity. Praying was not so much something he ought to do, as something he had to do. It was either that or be strongly tempted to give up. He told his disciples a **“parable on the necessity of praying always and not losing heart”**. With him, the choice was just that clear. It was either prayer or despair. And, I dare say, the same option confronts you and me.

One of two things is true about us human beings. Either God is with us, or we are alone. If God is with us, there is hope. Nothing we dream is too good to be true. If we are alone, there is no hope. It is just you and I, with our puny strength, pitted against the vast indifference of the universe. As one honest atheist put it: **“We cannot possibly win, but we don’t have to lose immediately”**. I, for one, would hate to go into battle with that inscribed on my shield. Jesus thought it all hinged on prayer.

I. Not to pray is to assume everything depends on us, and I find that to be a scary thought.

It isn’t that I have no faith in human nature, for I do. Some might even call me a humanist. I find the human strength to endure almost unbelievable. I am fascinated by the accomplishments of the human mind. I am intrigued by the artistic creations of the human race. I marvel at medical progress. I look at all of this and wonder what people will do in the next 100 years. It is beyond my power to imagine. But all the while, I know that we mortals do have limits. There are some things that we have not done and can never do.

For example, science tells us that millions of years ago the earth was uninhabitable. It was too hot, or too cold, or too something. And life as we know it simply could not survive here. This same science tells us that someday, the earth will be like that again. Then what? Will the earth be as naked and barren as the moon? Will the great human drama simply cease to be? If so, I cannot do anything about that. I have nothing to offer but faith in God. And if we human beings are all alone, I have nothing to offer but despair.

There is a legend, a dark legend, about creation. It tells the story as a stage play, orchestrated by God. At some point, God gets bored with the whole thing. So he sends a giant sun that crashes into the earth's sun. Everything and everybody is burned up. Nothing is left but ashes. Then God sits back, smiles, and says: **"It was fun. I must do it again someday."** Leave out prayer, and that is a scary story. It means everything depends on us, but some things are beyond us.

II. On the other hand, prayer means that we have a dependable ally.

That is what it meant to Jesus. His habit was to pray always. Otherwise, he would have lost heart. I should say so. Think of the things that confronted him. His religion branded him a heretic and excommunicated him. His government called him a traitor and sentenced him to die. His friends turned their backs on him in his most desperate hour of need. Do you recall how he handled all of that? He went to an olive garden, and prayed. When all else failed, he turned to the one ally that would never let him down. Take away that option, and Jesus had nothing left but to lose heart, and give up.

It is the same with you and me. Prayer is more than just a nice little religious exercise. When the chips are down, and we do not know what to do, prayer is an alternative to despair. **"Jesus told his disciples a parable on the necessity of praying always and not losing heart."** Do you find yourself on the verge of giving up? Remember, you have an ally. And his name is God.

It is as natural and reasonable for us to pray to God for what we need as it is for children to look to their parents for their heart's desires. Prayer is not forced on us by some pastoral duty or divine command. Prayer arises spontaneously in the troubled or joyful heart.

I invite you into a praying church. If you would join us, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.