

“When You Haven’t Got a Prayer”

Matthew 26:36-46

Sermon Series: Too Busy Not To Prayer Week 5. The Peace of Ceaseless Prayer

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Last week in her sermon, Martha spoke about her trip to the Creation Festival in 2002. It was also my first visit to this Christian Woodstock in the heart of Pennsylvania farm country. She said it is messy. It is. She neglected to mention she stayed up off the ground in a pop-up camper while I slept in a tent, on the ground, in a puddle of rainwater, along with a guy named Andy who snored like a chainsaw with a broken carburetor. Creation is an amazing week of inspiring speakers, powerful Christian bands and only 80,000 of your closest brothers and sisters in Christ. If you have never been, you really should go. It’s one of those incredible weeks when you get a taste of heaven. You are surrounded by thousands of people shouting and praising Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords. I can see why Martha and many others feel it changed their lives.

That Creation Festival almost changed my life...permanently. Just as we experienced the heights of God’s glory and praise, we also faced the darkness of a sudden and scary storm. At dinner time, I was standing by my blue Ford Windstar van, cooking hamburgers on the grill, when the sky turned dark and ominous. Wind whipped around our tents. Then I saw it: an entire dining tent with all its metal poles rose up into the sky from two campsites away. Like an enormous green vampire bat it swooped right at me. With poles flailing, it missed me by inches as it scraped across my van. The church group who came to claim their airborne eating tent apologized profusely and promised to pay for the damages. Weeks went by without a word. Finally I called the church and got the pastor on the phone. When I asked if they were going to cover the costs, there was a pause on the other end of the line. Finally the reverend said, “I’m sorry, but we talked to our insurance company and they said they’re not going to pay for it.” “Why?” I demanded. “They say it was caused by an ‘act of God.’”

How can a pastor argue with that?

Eventually they kept their promise and paid the damages.

In less than a week at Creation we went from celebrating the glory of our coming Savior to shuddering at the darkness of a coming storm.

Jesus had a week like that. It’s this week. Passion Week. It begins with loud shouts, praises, and hosannas. The people celebrate the glory of their coming Savior. But that’s on Sunday. By Thursday, a storm moves in. Darkness descends. Sin, like an enormous black tent swoops down and wraps around Jesus. By Friday afternoon, He’s dead. His critics who watch the crucifixion say, “It’s an act of God!” It looks like Jesus hasn’t got a prayer. And yet that’s just how He handled it all: with prayer.

Since Ash Wednesday, we have discovered that we are all *Too Busy Not To Pray*. First, we found the ultimate purpose of prayer is not to get our requests but to build a relationship with God. Next we learned the practice of prayer using the Lord's Prayer and the A.C.T.S. prayer. Gloria taught us the puzzle of unanswered prayer is solved by submission to God. Last week Martha used her journey of faith to show us how to stop, look, and listen for God's promptings and then take a leap and follow Him.

Many of you took the prayer challenge – to make time in every day between Ash Wednesday and Easter to be alone with God in prayer. It is absolutely wonderful to hear the difference it is making in your lives.

I am doing amazing with my PRAYER LIFE !!!! I can't be more grateful to God for always knowing what I need and working through other people and Woodside to bring me back into His loving arms !!!! Yay !!!! YIPPEE !!!!

The difference in spending that time has been tremendous. It is a highlight to my day with two of my favorite things - God and coffee! I feel like I have a clearer connection to God than ever before.

I found a place to pray, a time to pray, a strategy for prayer, and the Holy Spirit filled me with the desire to meet with our Lord like never before. And the blessings have not stopped. In fact, when I started, my prayers were mostly focused on what I needed, what I wanted, what I was afraid of. But last night my prayers were mostly thanksgiving and praise for Him taking control of my life, my needs, my pain, and blessing all those areas in ways I could not possibly imagine. My serious commitment to prayer has been the best change I have ever made.

If you have been blessed even a little by this prayer challenge – don't stop! In fact, I encourage you to turn daily prayer into prayer that lasts all day. The Apostle Paul tells us to "Pray continually" (I Thessalonians 5:17). To learn how to pray continually, let's look at Jesus. His whole life was one long prayer to His Father. I once heard a pastor say, "Jesus went from prayer meeting to prayer meeting and in between performed miracles." While Jesus prays at His baptism, the Holy Spirit descends and the voice of His Father booms from heaven. In the quiet of every dawn, Jesus goes off by Himself to talk with His Father. After feeding the five thousand, He dismisses the crowd, and goes "up on a mountainside by himself to pray" (Matthew 14:23). On another mountaintop, flanked by Moses and Elijah, His Father says, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Matthew 17:5). When He comes down from the mountain to find his disciples unable to drive out a demon, He tells them, "This kind can come out only by prayer" (Mark 9:29).

On His last night with His disciples, Jesus promises them and us that He will send us Someone who will help us pray at all times: the Holy Spirit.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it

neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. (John 14:16-17)

Jesus adds it is through the Spirit that the Father and Son come to live within us.

Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. (John 14:23)

This is an incredible promise. When we read the Story you will remember in the Old Testament God was unapproachable. He lived in heaven. Because of our sin, we could not get near Him without being annihilated. The Holy of holies in the Temple was the closest anyone dared approach. With Jesus, God comes to be with us in person. Yet the Lord goes one step further. Through the Spirit, God lives in us. Paul says,

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. (I Corinthians 6:19-20)

That’s the first step to praying continually: **Serve Under New Management.** While Lisa and I were away on vacation we dined one night at the Rainforest Hideaway. It’s a beautiful restaurant perched over a lagoon on the edge of a rainforest. Most diners must take a boat just to reach it. Before we ate there, however, we noticed signs announcing, “Open Again Under New Management.” Apparently its former glory was tarnished by mismanagement. Now, under the new manager, it sparkled and glowed under the starry heavens. It was a magical evening. The manager even stopped by our table to inquire about our meal. When the dessert arrived he asked why we waited. “For coffee,” we replied. “I don’t want your dessert to get cold.” Instantly he summoned the wait staff to bring our coffee. Now that’s service. They followed his every direction.

If you surrender your life to Jesus, you are under new management. He does not come in as a house guest. He is your Lord. He paid for you with His life. You now belong to Him. He is the new director. That means you and I continually check in with Him to learn what He wants us to do in each and every situation. To strong, independent, self-reliant Americans that may sound offensive. “Nobody is going to tell me what to do.” The reality, however, is we are always letting our spouse, our children, our parents, our boss, money, the culture, the media, our desires and fears tell us what to do. Jesus is the better director than all those since He created us, saved us, shows us the best way to live in this world and how to reach the next world. So as you go through the day, when you are stressed, anxious, uncertain or confused about what to do, pause and ask your director, “What do you want me to do?” One person who took the prayer challenge told me, “Although I’m not doing as well as I’d hoped I am doing better than I expected. It’s funny how many times during the day the thought (this may be a good time to pray) occurs to me.” That’s a life under new management.

The second way to pray continually is to **Seek First His Kingdom.** That’s what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount:

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:33-34)

Worry, according to Jesus, comes when we obsess about tomorrow instead of living in today, when we trust things first instead of God first. We need to change our perspective. We think God's Kingdom is up there or far off in the future. Yet God is working all around us all the time today. Our job is to seek Him and join Him in His work. In many of our prayers we ask God to bless what we are doing – “Help me to close this deal,” “Please let me get an A on this exam,” “Can you please make this kid sleep through the night?” Instead, let's seek where God is working and bless what He is doing.

You may ask, “How can I trust God first and stop worrying?” During our vacation, Lisa and I went on a zipline in the rainforest. One of our guides was Jeff. He was a wild and crazy guy except when it came to safety. Since we were dangling on a cable hundreds of feet up in the rainforest canopy, he reassured us we would be secure. “Don't worry mon,” he said, “you'll be triple strapped in. We use three harnesses to hook you to the cable. You ain't gonna fall.” You and I are hooked to God in three ways: Father, Son and Spirit. You can trust Him. He won't let you fall. So as Jeff might say, “Don't worry. Be happy.”

Toward the end of our zip trip, Jeff found out I was a pastor. “You're a pastor!” “Yep.” “What kind of pastor?” “Presbyterian.” “What's that?” “Never mind.” “Well pastor,” Jeff said, “I'm a believer in Jesus. And you know something pastor? You think you're on vacation but you're not.” “Really? Why do you say that?” “A pastor never stops serving the Lord. He's always doing God's kingdom work – he just changes location.” “That's cool Jeff. Now can you please unhook me and get me down.” I think what Jeff said about pastors applies to all Jesus' followers. Every day, all through the day, ask God, “What are you doing and how can I bless it?” The answer may be: forgive, ask for forgiveness, lend a hand, feed the hungry, invite a friend to Easter worship, give, listen, offer hope and a thousand other kingdom things. Seek first His Kingdom.

The third way to pray continually is: **Surrender to His Will.** Let's face it, we all want to maintain some measure of control. Our usual goal for each day is to get people and circumstances to work out the way we want. Unfortunately, that's everyone else's goal as well. So while I'm trying to control you, you're working hard to control me. Most of the problems in marriages, families, communities, churches, within nations and between nations can be traced back to a clash of control. Each of us is trying to run the show. Unfortunately, the cast and crew frequently don't follow our directions. That makes us angry, resentful, depressed, frustrated, worried, and afraid.

The truth is: none of us can run the show. God does. He is so powerful He can take even our sin, rebellion, and mismanagement and use it for His glory. What He prefers, however, is for us to follow His will. This is the prayer Jesus taught from the beginning: “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Jesus didn't just teach this: He lived it. In the darkness of Gethsemane, Jesus said,

My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me. (Matthew 26:38)

The word Gethsemane means “olive press.” Olives were crushed under a massive stone until all their oil wept out. There, among the olive trees, Jesus felt the weight of the sin of the world – past, present, and future – bearing down and crushing Him. Falling down with His face on the stone cold ground, Jesus cried out, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me” (Matthew 26:39). He did not fear the desertion of his friends, the public humiliation, the flogging or the crucifixion. It was the cup that flooded Him with sorrow and grief. The cup was brimming over with the righteous punishment of God against all our sin. Jesus, who never sinned, would soon have to drain that bitter cup of God’s wrath to the very last drop. He prayed with all His might. But this time, no choirs of angels sang, no Voice boomed from heaven. This time, at His moment of greatest need, there was only silence.

Now there was a choice before Him. Fight: call down legions of angels to drive off his approaching enemies. Or Flight: run off into the dark. Ages ago, in another garden, there was another human being who faced the same choice. While God was absent and everything was silent, Adam decided first to take matters into his own hands and eat the fruit and then to run away when the Lord returned. First it was fight against God’s will and then take flight from God’s wrath. That was the first of many falls into temptation down the ages. But now Jesus, all alone in the silence of the Garden of Gethsemane, did not fight or take flight. He did not fall into temptation. Instead, He fell on His knees and surrendered to His Father. “Yet not as I will,” He prayed, “but as you will.” (Matthew 26:39). Jesus submitted to this ‘act of God.’ The silence of that moment did not break Him. Instead, because Jesus surrendered His will, he broke the power of sin and saved us.

To pray all day, here are three things Jesus did every day, three things to say:

1. Serve: What do you want me to do, Lord?
2. Seek: What are you doing Lord and how can I bless it?
3. Surrender: Your will, not mine, be done Lord.

The day after we showed *War Room* Jen Hunter, a member of Woodside, went home, emptied out her clothes and made a prayer closet. She gave me permission to share her discoveries with you:

I've been spending a lot of time in my prayer closet. When I'm overwhelmed and don't know where to begin I've just been saying "show me show me show me" and he answers loud and clear what the next step is. God has shown me several things in just a short week. I woke this morning with an amazing revelation that my anger yesterday was not towards my sister but towards my mother that passed away 20 years ago. He has shown me places in my heart that need to heal, relationships that need mending and most importantly he has showed me how to go about that healing and mending with grace and love. Thank you to my Father

in heaven for forgiveness, for wisdom, for strength and mercy, and most importantly for loving and choosing me and my brokenness.

In her prayer closet Jen has a note which reads:

Be with me, in front of me, behind me, next to me, and inside me, all day and night Amen. I love you Father.

So when you feel you haven't got a prayer – God is there – talk to Him.