

“When Prayer Mean Power”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

February 22, 2004

Text: “And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Luke 9:29).

On Friday of this past week I attended the graduation exercises for my son, Will, who graduated from the NASCAR automotive technical school in Mooresville. As a parent, I was proud of how hard my son had worked to graduate at the top of his class, while still holding down a job. I also found myself wondering how many parents could have two children graduating at the same time: one from Duke University and the other from the NASCAR technical school.

After the graduation exercises, Will took the members of his family who had come for the graduation ceremonies on a brief tour of the school. One of the most impressive things for me

was the tremendous amount of technical skill involved in building racecars. It is a science that is measured in millimeters as racecar drivers and technicians seek to build cars with the power to reach speeds in excess of two hundred miles an hour.

I.

One of the passages in the Bible that has captured my imagination for a long time is the story of the “Transfiguration of Jesus” on the mountain. Luke’s gospel tells us that Jesus had taken with him to the Mountain three of the disciples: Peter, James and John. Luke tells us that when they were on the mountain, Jesus began to pray and suddenly his whole face changed and his clothes became a dazzling white. Suddenly the disciples looked up and saw something they could not have imagined. Jesus was being joined by two of the great figures of Israel’s past: Moses and Elijah.

William Willimon, writing in the *Christian Century*, has noted that that this experience on the Mountain of Transfiguration is “Christian worship as good as it gets.” In fact, I would like to go on record in saying, that as a minister this is what I want at every worship service--people caught up in a vision and revelation so powerful that in the end everyone there was silenced.

Peter catches the excitement of what I am referring to. He wants to build three monuments to commemorate what has happened. He wants it to last. “Let’s stay here forever,” he says, “Can’t we go past noon just this one Sunday?”

II.

There is a kind of spiritual hungering in our nation today. There is a void that people are trying to fill. Sometimes this void manifests itself in unusual ways. Let me cite two contemporary illustrations. Over the past year there has been an enormous interest in Dan Brown’s novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. As Jane Lampman has pointed in the *Christian Science Monitor*, the story of Mary Magdalene is captivating because it points to some of the major issues facing Christianity--the role of women in the church, the place of human sexuality in our lives, and the yearning by some people for the feminine aspects of the divine.

The second illustration of this spiritual hunger in our nation today is the intense interest in Mel Gibson’s movie, “The Passion of Christ,” that debuts in theaters this week. During the coming weeks, millions of Americans will go to see this movie, which has been acclaimed by some as one of the most powerful movies ever made about the life of Christ, while others charge that the portrayal of the Jewish people in the film will fuel the fires of anti-Semitism in our nation and world.

As I have followed with interest and amazement the great debate that has emerged around this book and movie, I was struck by the comment of Ben Witherington III of Asbury Theological Seminary, who observed, “America is a Jesus-haunted culture, but at the same time, it is a biblically illiterate culture. When you have that odd combination, he asserts, almost anything can pass for knowledge of the historical Jesus.”

One of the things that draws all of us to Jesus is power that Jesus derived from prayer. George Buttrick, in his great book on *Prayer*, notes that Jesus prayed at every decisive time of his life. He prayed when he was tempted in the wilderness. He prayed when he chose his disciples. He prayed when they wanted to make him a king. He prayed in Gethsemane. He prayed on the cross.

One of the most important things that any of us could hope for would be the ability to lay claim to prayer as one of the most powerful forces in our life and that is where I want to focus today.

III.

In the first place, if we are going to find prayer as a force of power in our lives, we are going to have to acknowledge that the God to whom we pray is a God who is both transcendent and immanent. He is immanent in that he works in our lives and is ever present for us. He is transcendent in that he stands beyond our every thought and attempt to capture him. Recently, I have come across a new biography, entitled *Martin Luther*, by Martin Marty, a distinguished church historian who teaches at the University of Chicago. Marty points out that Martin Luther was one of the most influential people of the past millennium. He is viewed in many differing ways: a rebel who brought a great protest against the medieval church; an anti-Semite who denounced the Jews of his own day; a man who hated anarchy so much that when the peasants of his time sought to rebel against their unjust masters, Luther sided with the rulers and encouraged them to crush the peasant revolt which they gladly did. Others have seen Luther as a man of great courage, a true reformer of the church. Marty sees Luther as a God obsessed seeker, man who understood the “God revealed” and the “God hidden.” There is a fundamental honesty in Luther that is very rare. At times he was a man of extreme confidence. On other occasions he was plagued with doubt and despair.

One of the prominent themes of the Reformed faith is captured in the Latin expression “Finitum not est capax infiniti,” which means “the finite cannot contain the infinite.” The Reformed faith has always recognized the distinction between the “creator” and the “creature.” In practical terms this expresses that, “God’s ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts.”

God does not always answer our prayers in the ways that we hope. His ways are not our ways and his thoughts not our thoughts. In his great autobiography, *Confessions*, St. Augustine wrestles with this aspect of God in his own life. As a young man, Augustine rebelled against God and his family. His mother prayed that he would become a Christian, but Augustine seemed to do everything in his power to rebel against that notion. One day he told his mother that he was going to Italy to travel. His mother prayed that her son would not make that journey. She feared that his faith would be even further shattered in such a pagan country. Yet, something happened that Augustine’s mother, Monica, could have never imagined. Augustine traveled to Europe against his mother’s wishes and prayers. While he was in Milan, he came under the influence of a great Christian teacher, Ambrose of Milan, and became a Christian. Augustine reflected in his *Confessions* that God had to deny his mother’s specific request in order to fulfill her deepest one.

IV.

In the second place, if we are to experience prayer as power, we need to learn to pray affirmatively. So much of popular prayer today is little more than what Reinhold Niebuhr once called “lobbying in the courts of the almighty.” We ask God for this or for that and when we do not get what we want, we become angry and petulant.

One does not find that kind of prayer in the New Testament. True prayer is affirmative. It turns us away from ourselves and toward God.

Listen to the word of the Psalmist:
“The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me besides still waters.
He restores my soul.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil
for
Thou art with me”(Psalm 23).

That is affirmative prayer. In sickness it claims health. In anxiety it affirms faith. In discouragement it centers on the inexhaustible resources of God. When Martin Luther faced the German Emperor at Worms, he prayed this prayer:

“O Thou my God, stand by me, against all the world. Thou must do it, Thou alone. It is not my cause, but Thine.”

That is affirmative prayer. It does not so much ask as take; it does not so much beg for living water as sink its shaft into it and draws from it. It starts as Jesus did: “Our Father, who art in heaven.”

IV.

Then, too, if prayer becomes power in our lives, it will be because we have learned to pray dangerously. The idea that prayer could be dangerous is strange for many of us, but it is nonetheless true. Many of us think that prayer is a comfortable retreat from the world of danger, but that demonstrates how little we understand it. In Gethsemane Jesus prayed, “Not my will, but thy will be done.” If ever there was a man who could have escaped crucifixion, if had only trimmed his sails a bit, that man was Jesus. But instead, he prayed that God’s will be done, and after that prayer he walked out of Gethsemane to the cross.

Then, too, there was the great prophet Jeremiah, whom some have called the “father of true prayer.” He often wished he could escape the severe compulsions of his duty, but he was always prevented from running away by the habit of prayer. As Jeremiah himself put it, God said to him, “Call unto me, and I will answer you, and I will show you great things and difficult.”

This past week, as I was thinking about this sermon, I came across a reference to the great English Reformer Hugh Latimer, who was burned at the stake in Oxford for his faith. I wondered what Latimer would say to us today? Would he remind us that sometimes our faith and our prayers make great demand of us? Would he remind us that sometimes praying the way Jesus prayed costs us, what it cost him, his very life indeed?

V.

Then, finally, if we are to find real power in our prayer, we need to learn to pray without discouragement. Jesus once told his disciples that they, “ought always to pray, and not to faint.” Sometimes our prayers take more than a lifetime to complete.

Someone once observed that the great composer Beethoven wrote music that he knew could not be played adequately by the instruments of his day. It was as if he wrote his music for something yet unfound. His music was a prayer that he hoped would produce the instruments that could play it. In fact, that is what happened. His music compelled the creation of new instruments and new techniques. As his biography put it, “Born into a day of small things, he helped the day to expand by giving it creations beyond the scope of its available means of expression.”

That is the characteristic of all great prayer. Columbus’s search for new sea routes to the Indies was a prayer. Edison’s search for the secret of incandescence was a prayer. Jesus taught us that when we pray, we are to pray, “Thy kingdom come; thy will be done.” That is a prayer that spans the ages.

Christian prayer is not the endeavor to get God to do what we want. It is the endeavor to put ourselves in such a relationship with God that he can do in and through us what he wants. Almost all of the worst misunderstandings and perversions of prayer start with egotism--ourselves at the center and our trying to get what we want. But when Jesus prayed, he said, “Not my will, but thy will be done.”

Today, we need prayer that is rooted in God’s true nature, that is affirmative, that is dangerous, and that is not discouragement.

Luke’s gospel tells us that on the Mountain of Transfiguration Jesus prayed, and that his face shone, and then he set his face to go to Jerusalem to meet his death.

May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.
Amen!