

## **Bold Prayers**

Hebrews 4:14-16

October 4, 2015

Rev. Pen Peery

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

Our second Scripture lesson this morning is from the book of Hebrews. I want to say two things about this Scripture before you hear it – in order to help you hear what God is saying through this passage.

First, the book of Hebrews was written to encourage believers in the faith. That sounds pretty obvious. But what is important to know about Hebrews is that those who were hearing these words were not new in the faith. They were not hearing the story of Jesus for the first time. They were established Christians. Hebrews was written because even those who are familiar with the stories of Scripture and the life of faith need to be encouraged.

Second, this morning's passage describes Jesus as a "Great High Priest." More than any other book in the Bible, Hebrews uses the language of a High Priest to describe who Jesus was and what his life, death, and resurrection meant. In Jewish tradition, the presence of God resided in the Ark of the Covenant, which was placed in a part of the Temple called the "Holy of Holies." Only the High Priest was able to enter the Holy of Holies. The priest did so on behalf of the people: to petition God on the people's behalf; to confess to God on the people's behalf; to seek the will of God on the people's behalf. The writer of Hebrews envisions Jesus in this role – Jesus is the one who is in direct communication and contact with God on our behalf.

So now, listen with me to the word of God. I am reading from the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter....

+++

*Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

+++

In one of the funniest – and most awkward – scenes of the movie, *Meet the Parents*, the main character, Greg, sits down to dinner with his new fiancé Pam to face the man and woman who will be his in-laws. Greg is played by Ben Stiller, and his father-in-law to be, Jack Burns, is played by Robert De Niro.

In spite of the fact that Greg was raised in a home with – shall we say – a dramatically different parenting philosophy, Greg is hoping to convince the Burns' that he is worthy of their daughter's hand in marriage. It does not go well. Opposite his free-spirited and emotionally available would-be son-in-law, Jack Burns is like a drill sergeant who wouldn't recognize his feelings if they knocked him to the floor.

The night that Greg comes over for dinner, everyone sits down to eat, Jack asks Greg if he would like to say the blessing. Greg – who isn't exactly what you would call "religious" and clearly not practiced in the art of saying grace – agrees and pulls out all the stops he can remember:

"O dear God. You are such a good God to us...a kind, gentle, accommodating God. And we thank you. Sweet Lord of hosts...for the smorgasbord...you have so aptly lain at our table...this day...and each day...by day. Day by day by day. O dear Lord, three things we pray: To love thee more dearly. To see thee more clearly. To follow thee more nearly. Day by day...by day. Amen."

Oh...it's so painful. And funny. And true.

+ + +

This isn't based on scientific data, but I would guess that for most people, praying out loud and in front of people ranks right up there with other most-common-fears like public speaking or snakes or spiders.

One of the benefits of growing up in a family of pastors is that I could avoid my fear of public praying in my youth. When it came to prayers, my sister and I would take bets on whether mom or dad would give the l-o-n-g-e-s-t blessing at the supper table (Vegas odds favored mom almost every time...).

No, growing up, most of my prayer life was limited to my prayers before bedtime – something that I was encouraged to do from an early age.

And – as I imagine a lot of people do – it didn't take me long to develop that bedtime prayer into a solid ritual.

*Thank you God for mommy and daddy and Meg, Peep-o, Grandmom and Granddad, Walt, Marshall, Chinena and John-John and all your children everywhere. In Jesus' name – Amen.*

I developed this bedtime prayer when I was either six or seven years old. I can tell you that with certainty, because Walt and Marshall were friends of mine in the first grade, and Chinena and John-John were friends that I met at a week-long conference that my mom and dad attended as they prepared to become missionaries in the summer before second grade.

But here's the thing – I prayed that bedtime prayer until I was late in junior high school. If it ain't broke, don't fix it...right? By the time I was in the ninth grade, it

had been a good seven years since I had spoken to Marshall and Walt, and I couldn't begin to tell you what Chinena and John-John looked like.

It's not as if I had nothing else to pray about: a lot happened in my life between second and ninth grade. But my prayer life was stuck in neutral – and the language that I used to speak to God was based in routine rather than relationship.

+ + +

I think that happens a lot. Our prayer life – and our life of faith – get stuck in neutral. Church, worship, prayer, faith...it becomes routine. It's a part of us – but we are so used to it that the words we say and the words we hear about God, and grace, and forgiveness, and hope...they don't have the same impact they once did.

Tom Long, a Presbyterian pastor and scholar, writes that the book of Hebrews was written for a people who were “weary” in their faith. They were a people who had staked their lives on the promise of Jesus' resurrection...a promise that their parents or their grandparents had told them about...but now, they were two or three generations removed from those eyewitnesses. This new generation of Christian disciples practiced their faith in a world that still needed miracles, healings, justice, teaching...only now, as their pastor had probably reminded them, the Messiah who did all those things was gone. Now, it was the believers who made up the body of Christ. Now, their preacher told them, “the only body Christ has in the world is yours.”

It's enough to make you tired. Weary.

And if you think they were weary – trying following Jesus today. We're not just two generations removed from Christ, we're two millennia. We have been talking and praying and singing and preaching about things like healing and wholeness and peace and justice – and we need those things now more than we ever did. We come to church and we practice our faith in a world that increasingly doesn't seem to care about what we say or what we believe. We needle our spouse or our children or our friends to show up on Sunday morning – something that gets harder and harder to do – because now there are more and more things that compete with spending two hours on a weekend coming to church.

When we finally do get a quiet moment – and we commit ourselves to coming before God in prayer – where do we start? There is so much need. In our own lives. In our families. We read the latest headlines – another school shooting; violence and threat in Syria. We know there are things broken in our society. How do you pray for all that? Where do you start?

It may be that many of us avoid praying in public because it makes us nervous – but I suspect another reason why we avoid it is because we are a little uncertain about for what we should pray. And I would guess that is true whether the prayers we offer are in public or in private.

Have you ever wondered, as I have...

- Whether God really cares about the things I want to pray about; because the concerns in my life are too insignificant relative to the rest of the problems in the world?
- Whether I should refrain from sharing with God the things about myself about which I am ashamed?
- Whether it is appropriate to let God know what I really feel – even if that feeling is confusion, or hurt, or anger...
- Or – even – whether I am asking too much – whether my prayer is beyond the limit of what God might do?

And – since we are really being honest – have you have wondered whether our prayers make a difference at all? Because as much as we pray – there is still disease, there is still brokenness, there is still injustice, there is still pain.

+ + +

Hebrews was written to a people who were asking these kinds of questions – who were a little weary in their faith – and this scripture encourages us to remember: that the one through whom we pray – to whom we belong because he gave up his life for us – Jesus not only gives us access to the heart of God, but as important, Jesus has experienced the fullness of our hearts.

You've heard it before, *but hear it again...*

Where there is pain – Jesus has felt it.

Where there is brokenness – Jesus has been broken by it.

Where there is suffering – Jesus has suffered it.

Where there is joy – Jesus has rejoiced in it.

Hebrews was written to encourage people like us to remember that our prayers and our faith and our blessings and our struggles – they all matter to God because we belong...every part, every feeling, every temptation, every weariness, every hope...we belong to a living Lord who sympathizes with us...who knows us...who saves us...and who is working out his purposes through us.

So take heart. And pray and practice your faith with boldness.

Because – by sisters and brothers in Christ – there is always grace in the time of need.