



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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MARCH 22, 2015
THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT
BE THOU MY VISION

Open Our Eyes to the Gifts of Scripture and Prayer
II Timothy 3:1-5, 14-17; Luke 11:1-13

It was a simple request, understandable coming from people who gratefully counted themselves as disciples of the great teacher. While on most days the stories and insights Jesus offered them were like clusters of grapes ripe for the taking, today was different. Jesus had spent the morning in prayer. They knew that when he slipped off to that secluded spot to pray, he was not to be bothered. They busied themselves taking care of errands, catching up on local news, and wondering what happened when Jesus prayed for hour on end. As students, their role was to recognize the areas where they lacked sufficient knowledge and to seek a better understanding from Jesus. So it was not unusual when he came back to the place they were staying for them to ask questions about the life of faith he was proclaiming.

It was a rather simple request they asked of him, “Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples.” It was also odd, don’t you think? The disciples who followed Jesus were people steeped in prayer. Prayer was a vital component of their faith and their life. Three times a day they faced the temple and prayed. Morning and evening, they began with the Shema, the heart of their faith:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

On the Sabbath, family gathered to recite prayers and later joined neighbors to pray with the entire community in the synagogue. They knew these prayers by heart and recited them often. Scripture was replete with the prayers of patriarchs, prophets, and peasants. The psalms, many of which they attributed to their great King David, served as their prayer book. Prayer

was the heartbeat of their faith. So why do you think the disciples wanted Jesus to teach them to pray as John had taught his disciples?

John the Baptist was a bit of an enigma then, as he is now. We know he was a prophet who had chosen an ascetic life in the wilderness. His clothes were simple and rough. His diet was austere and uncomplicated. His message, however, was clear and powerful: “Repent, and be baptized.” Thousands of people rushed to the Jordan River to hear John preach and to be baptized by him in the freshening water. They believed that if all of Israel repented, God would finally send the Messiah. So John called the people to repentance and many of them responded.

John also had a group of followers, but we do not know specifically what he taught them. The Gospels indicate that there was interaction between the disciples of John and Jesus, so there must have been some discussion of John’s teaching on prayer. I wonder if the disciples felt as if they were getting shortchanged? Perhaps John had come up with one of those clever mnemonic devices that helped his disciples keep their prayers balanced. You’ve heard of acronyms like ACTS: Adoration. . . Confession . . . Thanksgiving . . . and Supplication. Did Jesus’ disciples also want something interesting to share when they bumped into John’s disciples at the town well in the morning? Or were they looking for something different?

We are told that Jesus was praying “in a certain place,” as if it were somewhere he often went to spend time in prayer. Clearly this time for communion with God was important to Jesus for the disciples waited respectfully until he had finished before they brought their request to him. Do you suppose they saw something different in the way Jesus prayed and the routine ways most other people prayed? He had taught that prayer was a private matter with God and should not be used for show, as the Pharisees often did. Did they sense a different tone, a fresh intensity, a surprising simplicity, and a compelling sincerity in Jesus’ manner of praying that was appealing to them? Perhaps it was a sense that with Jesus life itself was a prayer and they wanted that kind of life as well.

There was another occasion when a lawyer asked a different but equally simple question: “Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Rather than hand him the answer, Jesus prompted the man to answer his own question. “What is written in the law? How do you read?” (Luke 10:25-26) Being the observant Jew that he was, the man answered with the words of scripture he recited daily, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with

all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind” and he added from Leviticus the text that Jesus would cause him never to forget, “and your neighbor as yourself.” “Right you are,” said Jesus. “Do these things and you will live” (Luke 10:27-28).

As Luke tells the story, it was shortly after this teachable moment that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. Perhaps it was in his answer to the lawyer that the disciples understood the convergence of the two great gifts God had given them: scripture and prayer. Scripture offered guidance in how to live and prayer opened the door to the life of faith.

The Apostle Paul obviously expected Christ to return within his lifetime and he consistently urged his hearers to be prepared. When writing to Timothy, his son in the faith, Paul acknowledged some of the horrible things that go on in the world. He offered a “catalogue of vices” to warn Timothy of the dangers all around him. Then he reminded his young friend of the great gift he had in scripture: “All God-breathed scripture is beneficial for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,” he wrote, “to the end that every child of God may be proficient and equipped for every good work” (II Timothy 3:16-17, paraphrased).

At the time, of course, the only scripture available to the Jews and early Christians were the writings of the Old Testament—the Law, the Prophets, and the Wisdom writings. The Gospels and the other New Testament writings came later. Believing, however, that God inspired his people to write their experiences and insights in order that we might learn from them, we consider scripture, as we have it, to be sacred.

Sacred, however, does not mean that it cannot be touched and handled. For a long time, we have been known as “people of the book” because we depend upon the Bible for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. One of the greatest gifts to come out of the Protestant Reformation was the accessibility of scripture for all people. Reformers like Martin Luther believed regular folks like you and me should be able to read and interpret scripture. Scholars like John Wycliffe made the text available in familiar languages and the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg made the Bible accessible to all people.

Nevertheless, we have adopted some unfortunate misconceptions about scripture, the primary one being that it is difficult to understand. Granted there are portions of scripture that are obtuse and puzzling and downright

hard to grasp, but when we consider that at its core it is the story of God and his people, the pieces begin to fit. The Bible is our story. In it we read the ways in which ancient people began to make sense of this wonderful world in which they lived. We see the rise of religious sensibilities and then God breaks in and claims to be the one, true God and invites Abraham and Sarah to become partners in forming a people who will tell the world about God and his love for them. We read about all of the things, good and bad, that families do to one another. We see the positive and negative ways people interact with each other. We learn about mistakes and triumphs that sound amazingly familiar. And we discover how God persistently hangs in with his people and does not give up on them.

The Bible contains every kind of literature—history, poetry, biography, narrative, exhortation, philosophy, theology—its all there. There is no other book as comprehensive in covering the experience of humankind than the Bible. And it is ours, given to us by God to learn and to live.

I remember beginning my sophomore year at Furman with some trepidation. I was about to take my first biblical course on the Old Testament. One of my best friends back home had warned me about college courses on the Bible. “The professors will tell you all sorts of things about the Bible that aren’t true,” he said. “They will challenge your faith.” While he was right about the second warning, he was wrong about the first. My professors did challenge my faith which, at the time, was rather unformed and naive. And while they changed my understanding about the Bible, they did not teach me any untruths. They opened my eyes to the wonderful reservoir of faith that is Holy Scripture and helped me to understand that its pages tell my story and offer the hope for my life.

I distinctly remember preparing for that course with prayer. “God,” I prayed, “I know little to nothing about the Bible and am only beginning to understand my faith. I have to trust that these professors have studied with the goal of discovering truth. I also have to believe that you have placed them here to help all of us learn and grow. Help me to trust what you and they are doing together.” It was probably the single best period of learning and growth I have ever had in my life. I began to understand what the Bible is and what it offers to us. And I began to grow in faith and depend upon prayer to commune with God.

I will forever be grateful to the men and women over the years who have opened the Bible to me. Sunday School teachers, pastors, professors,

preachers, scholars and friends like you have helped me to appreciate the rich resource that the Bible is for us. I have learned that I do not have to be afraid of scripture. After all, I am reading about myself. And the end of the story always turns out well because Christ rises and invites me to rise with him.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he did offer what we know as the Model Prayer or Lord's Prayer. We offer it together every time we worship. I don't know that Jesus intended us to recite it verbatim, but I do know that he wanted us to understand that prayer is about life. To fully live, we need to appreciate the fact that life comes from God alone; therefore, we begin our prayer with an acknowledgment of God's holiness and wonder. We understand that we are partners with God so we pray that the kingdom, the way of life God desires, will become evident here as it is where God is. We seek whatever provisions we need for the day and we desire to be freed from the sin which hounds us, offering that same grace to other people. Then we acknowledge that everything is in the hands of God.

I confess to you that am not always good about setting aside a particular time each day to pray nor do I always read the Bible daily. I did learn in that sophomore Old Testament class, however, that the Bible is the source book for my faith and deserves my attention. I also learned that prayer is not only particular words uttered at a particular time. Prayer is also a way of life. For me, my thoughts, my questions, my ponderings, and my conversations become my prayer. Prayer offers me an ongoing awareness of God's presence with me.

We cannot see a vision for where God is leading us unless we look. God has given us scripture and prayer to guide us on that journey. They are gifts, wrapped in the compassion God has for his people, and offered with sacrificial love. Do not be afraid of the Bible. Do not neglect to pray. Scripture and prayer are simple gifts with extraordinary value. And they are ours. Thanks be to God. Amen.

March 22, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

It is the core of all our prayers, O God, the seed which can flourish and blossom into a life that is full and complete: we “would be like thee.” Gracious, truthful, merciful, and mighty in spirit, we could enjoy the life you have offered us and prevail against any evil that might come our way. It is the way of your Son, our Savior, who came that we might have this life and who lived that we might truly live as well. Gracious God, help us to be like you.

Help us to be like you in the ways we interact with one another. Strip from us the jealousy, insecurity and arrogance that so often divide us and, with humility and gratitude, claim one another as sister and brother. Enable us not only to condemn the racism we witness in fraternity chants, police videos, and anonymous acts of vandalism, but to recognize the weeds of racism that grow within us and threaten to wrap themselves around our hearts until we no longer love one another as you have loved us.

Help us to be like you in acts of kindness and mercy when we recognize a need before us and the resources you have given to us. Make us aware, O God, of the many ways we can help one another with little more than an offering of our time and compassion. For all of the gifts you have given us that tend toward life, we are grateful. When we pray for our friends who are ill, for loved ones who live on the edge of disaster, and for people who do not know which way to turn, we pray as well for those of us who have been given the gifts of healing and discernment and wise counsel. Help us to be like you as we seek to help one another, we pray.

Mighty and compassionate God, help us to be like you as we seek to make your kingdom evident in our midst. Grant us the wisdom and the determination to create a community of love and trust, where all people are valued, where each of us respects the other, and where we all work together for the common good. Help us to be like you, O God, in our willingness to give our lives to this calling, fully trusting in your ability to bring new life from what appears to us to be dead. In this season of seeking, be our light to illumine the darkness and help us to discover that we do bear your image. Be our light and shine within us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.