



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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JUNE 26, 2016  
THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## Waiting and Wrestling Genesis 32; I Thessalonians 5:14-25

Inspiration comes in many ways and at various times. Friday evening, our daughter Catherine sent us a picture of the sunset as seen from the top of World Trade Center One. The picture is looking west across the Hudson River. At the top you see blue sky with a bank of gray clouds hovering underneath. The white orb of the sun beams from a pillow of yellow that sits on an orange cushion. Below, a solitary line of orange light traces a path along the calm water of the river directly toward the memorials of the former World Trade Center towers. There is an aura of tranquility in that scene as well as a sense of strength coming from the light.

Other things inspire us: a sunrise, ocean waves, the singing of birds, music, children at play, lovers holding hands, silence. And every once in a while inspiration comes during worship! At least for me it did last Sunday. As we finished singing the middle hymn and sat down, I glanced back at the hymnal and realized that a prayer was printed below the hymn which was "Be Still, My Soul." It was a prayer by Peter Ainslie, an early Twentieth-century Disciples pastor in Baltimore. I decided to read it. I wonder if anyone else read it? Rev. Ainslie prayed,

O God of patience and pardon, save us from the impoverishment and danger of hurry in our devotions, lest the bloom of our spiritual life be permanently blighted. Revive us from our leanness of soul and coldness of heart by awakening in us the sense of waiting and wrestling with thee. Hush within us the first rise of murmurings against the taxing necessities of prayer. May there be no counting the cost of time and labor, lest our foundations be imperiled. O Lord, pardon us of all slovenliness in our devotions and set us to redeeming the time with gladness.<sup>1</sup>

Those words spoke to me in a very personal way. To describe our devotions with terms like "impoverishment" and "hurry," to mention our "leanness of soul" and our "coldness of heart," was getting a bit personal. to

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Ainslie, "Wrestling and Waiting," *Chalice Hymnal*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995), 567.

suggest that our devotions are "slovenly" was downright insulting, except that I knew Rev. Ainslie was right. At least for myself, I knew that his prayer needed to be my prayer. Right then and there, as Mark himself inspired us with his beautiful improvisation, I decided to address this issue of our devotional lives.

Some of you are truly devout when it comes to spending time every day reading scripture and praying. Some of us make serious attempts at praying regularly while others of us never seem to get in a rhythm that feels natural to us. Especially in the summer, but at other times as well, it is easy to neglect our spiritual lives. We all have a need to focus on the time we spend alone with God.

Prayer seems like it should be the most natural thing in the world, and it is. I daresay each of us prays many times during the day, sometimes without even consciously thinking about prayer. We speak to God and speak whatever is on our heart at the moment. That is prayer.

The late Henri Nouwen was a Dutch Roman Catholic priest who taught in numerous schools around the world, including here in the United States. The final years of his life were spent ministering to people with mental illness at a religious community in Toronto. As someone who thought about and practiced prayer a lot, he admitted that anytime someone interviewed a monk and asked why he had devoted himself to prayer, the answers always sounded silly simply because the real answer is always too deep to offer. To explain, he tells the story of Philippe Petit, a tightrope walker who was arrested in 1974 for walking on a rope which he and his companions had managed to stretch between the twin towers of the former World Trade Center. He was subjected to a psychiatric exam, but when it was determined that he was, indeed, sane, the police asked him why he would risk his life by walking on a tightrope between the tallest towers in New York City. Philippe was puzzled by the question at first, but then he answered, "Well . . . if I see three oranges, I have to juggle, and if I see two towers, I have to walk."<sup>2</sup>

Nouwen points out that it seems absurd to ask a child why he is playing with a ball, a lover why he loves, or a tightrope walker why she is on a thin line high in the air. The answers are self evident because these are things people do when they follow their passion. So, people of faith pray because that is what we do. It is what unites our lives with the One about whom we

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<sup>2</sup>*New York Times*, Sunday, August 11, 1974, Section 4, p. 18, as cited in Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, (London: Fount Paperback, 1998: 84.

are passionate. However, Nouwen cautions, if we do not pray, we lose touch with this passion, this intimate core of our spiritual life.<sup>3</sup>

In the Gospel of John, Jesus invites his disciples, "Abide in me, and I in you" (15:4). To explain this relationship, he offers the analogy of a vine and its branches which are interdependent. Devotion, which includes prayer, meditation, study, contemplation, and many other activities, is the means by which our spirits link with the Spirit of God and enable us to abide with God. Yet, I think that we sometimes get bored with our prayers. We run down our list of needs, trying to think of new ways to ask favors of God. As the list grows longer, so does the time it takes to offer those prayers. We hurry to get back to the pressing tasks of the day. We sometimes get frustrated with our praying because we are always asking something of God. Some days bring the answers we want; some days do not, but we are tempted to find the right formula of prayer that will guarantee that we move the heart of God to act every time we petition God. Sometimes we read a devotion but we are distracted. Our mind is on other things. We sit and pray for a while, but we don't really "abide," do we?

Professor David Rensberger reminds us that to abide means to dwell, to be present with someone or something. He also notes that abiding implies persistence. We abide when we do not give up or go away. We persist with what we are doing. However, the very act of persisting also indicates that we can give up our persistence. We can choose to go away. We can fall away from our relationship with God.<sup>4</sup>

To be persistent we need to engage God in relationship. We must talk with God about more than our laundry list of needs. We must discuss our lives, what is going on with us, what makes us joyful, what brings us sorrow, what offers hope, what causes fear.

We all remember Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye prays—a lot! In fact, he claims that if he had the chance, he would pray seven hours a day in the synagogue. Marilyn Chandler McEntyre reminds us that Tevye's prayers are intimate. They are conversational. And they are argumentative.<sup>5</sup> I imagine that God sits up straight and leans in to listen when Tevye calls on him because he knows it will be a very interesting and engaging conversation.

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<sup>3</sup>Nouwen, 85.

<sup>4</sup>David Rensberger, "Persisting in Presence," *Weavings* (March/April 2007): 21.

<sup>5</sup>Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, "The Encompassing Embrace," *Weavings*, (March/April 2007): 6.

The Jews have a long history of arguing with God. You remember that when God informed Abraham that he was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham argued with God and bargained with God until a more reasonable verdict was reached (Genesis 18). You will also remember that when Jesus was praying in the Garden just before he was arrested, he challenged God. It is a moment of raw humanity as Jesus prays about his impending crucifixion. According to Glenn Hinson, the Gospel writer Mark plays it straightforward. Jesus prays and weeps, calling God by the intimate name, Abba, Daddy. Then he insists, "For you all things are possible; remove this cup from me." Matthew and Luke, however, soften the tone considerably by adding "if you wish" or "if possible." But Mark reports Jesus demanding that God take the cup from him. Then, falling back on his self-prescribed child-like faith, Jesus adds, "yet, not what I want, but what you want" (14:36).<sup>6</sup>

Our prayers and devotions might be more interesting to us and to God if we engaged God about what is going on in our lives. Ask God some really tough questions, the ones that nag you all day and keep you awake at night. Listen for God's answer, but listen by doing some research of your own and talk to God about it. Bring up a passage of scripture that you don't understand, perhaps one of Jesus' parables. Be honest with God and state outright that you don't think it is fair that the workers who arrived late in the day were paid the same as those who worked the entire day. Protest the treatment of the elder brother who stayed home with his father while the younger son lost his inheritance in a less than noble way. Complain to God that you have faith but no mountains are moving for you. Let God have whatever is on your mind. Pour out your heart. Ask questions. Demand answers. Beg for understanding. Argue with God about anything that gets under your skin. God can handle your questions and raw emotions. God will welcome them. God will abide with you as long as you want to hang around.

Luke introduces the parable of the judge and persistent widow with these words, "And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart" (18:1). In other words, pray but don't give up with God. Abide with God. Be persistent.

Our Old Testament lesson today is a familiar and favorite story of the second born son of Isaac, that scoundrel Jacob. After fleecing his brother, deceiving his father, running to his Uncle Laban who was the biggest swindler in the land, and outfoxing him, Jacob returned to his homeland to confront his brother Esau. He sends servants ahead with gifts of livestock and other

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<sup>6</sup>E. Glenn Hinson, "Not Giving Up," *Weavings* (July/August 2007): 9-11.

valuables to appease his brother. He sends his wives and children and servants ahead for their safety. He remains alone by the River Jabbok to deal with all of the things he has done in his life and the ways God has continually blessed and delivered him. He waits before rushing home. Listen to what happened:

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle. Genesis 32:24-32

Jacob engaged God. He abided with God until God acted and blessed him. Jacob's experience at the Jabbok is spiritual devotion and contemplation and prayer at its best. Jacob wrestles and prevails because he is blessed and given a new name. True, he walks away with a limp, but it serves as a reminder of his face-to-face encounter with God. His old name, which meant "Trickster" or "Heel-Sneak," is replaced with "Israel" which means "to strive with God." Jacob wrestled God and was blessed. He got into the ring. He went one-on-one. He wrestled and he waited until the blessing came.

Why can't we do the same? Why can't our devotions be a bit spicier, a little more inquisitive, even confrontive? Why can't our prayers be bare bones honest? After all, we are talking to the One who knows us better than anyone else. Why can't we do a little digging and reflect on some tough issues that are important to our faith and then ask God to help us understand. God might put his finger where it hurts the most, but when we walk away, any limping will be a witness to the blessing of abiding with God. If you want to engage God and truly abide with Christ, then pray and wrestle and wait for the blessing to come. That experience, I believe, will be inspiring. Amen.

Let us pray:

O God of patience and pardon, save us from the impoverishment and danger of hurry in our devotions, lest the bloom of our spiritual life be permanently blighted. Revive us from our leanness of soul and coldness of heart by awakening in us the sense of waiting and wrestling with thee. Hush within us the first rise of murmurings against the taxing necessities of prayer. May there be no counting the cost of time and labor, lest our foundations be imperiled. O Lord, pardon us of all slovenliness in our devotions and set us to redeeming the time with gladness. Amen. Peter Ainslie

June 26, 2016

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Loving and Patient God, we come to you this morning with hearts of gratitude for the gift of a new day, for family and friends, for the beauty of your creation. Open our eyes to behold the wonder of your gracious hand and help us to rejoice with the whole of creation.

In particular today, O God, we thank you for the gift of music and for the privilege to use it to tell of your love for us and our love for one another. Bless with renewed hope, energy and sensitivity all who plan and lead liturgy and music, minister, musicians, composers and singers. In this servant ministry, help us to listen to each other as we enable congregation to express their longing for you, and encourage us to let go everything that harms and hinders us in this task. Grant us the discernment to value these gifts and to nurture them in humility. By your sweet Holy Spirit, empower all to work in partnership and harmony as we proclaim your praise and sing of your love.

We thank you for the gift of our church and the opportunities it provides for service to you, our community and to those we may never meet. Bless our endeavors, O God, however small and humble, and may we always be led in the way of truth and healing.

We pray for our nation and for wisdom to be granted to those who govern, and for all people everywhere. Look with compassion, dear Father, on the whole human family. Take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts. Break down walls that separate us and unite us in bonds of love. Work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; and in your good time, may all nations and races serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne.

We have mentioned those among us this morning, and we pray for them in a particular way. Be near them, O God, even now that they may feel your power all around them and grant them healing of body, mind and spirit and the comfort of knowing that you hold all heaven and earth in your loving hands. Help us to heal those who are broken for in our giving is our own healing.

Speak to and through us during this hour of worship and may every word spoken and sung be to your glory alone. All this we ask for your mercy sake, Amen.

Amy Shortt  
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