

June 17, 2018

“Pray Boldly”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Acts 12: 1-19

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As you can see by my sermon title, I’m going to talk about prayer today. And I want to begin with a story about prayer. There was a small town in the South that was “dry,” meaning no alcohol was served in the town. But then the law got changed and a local businessman decided to build a tavern. A group of Methodists from the nearby church were so concerned, they felt it was their obligation to gather people in the community and have a prayer vigil asking God to intervene, and stop the tavern from being built. Work continued however, and the tavern was completed. But then, a few days before the opening, there was a tremendous thunderstorm in the middle of the night, and lightning hit the structure and it burned to the ground. The Methodists were delighted – no one was hurt and the tavern was gone. Delighted, that is, until they received notice that the owner of the tavern was suing them for five million dollars. He contended their prayers were responsible for the burning of his building, preventing him from making a living. So the church hired a lawyer to help them fight the suit, arguing that the loss of the tavern was nothing more than just pure coincidence. At the conclusion of the hearing, after both sides gave their arguments, the judge sarcastically remarked, “I don’t know what to make of all this, but it seems to me that the tavern owner believes in the power of prayer, and the Methodists do not.”

We may laugh at this story, but it gets to the point of my sermon today – do we pray boldly and with the expectation that God will honor our prayer? Do we pray boldly and with confidence that God hears and God will answer? Let me share with you what happened last weekend. Our whole family got together to celebrate our son Matthew’s birthday at his house in Hingham, and at the end of the day, our two grandkids, Cora, seven, and Ollie, five, performed a Mary Poppins play on the lawn for all of us to watch. They’re into Mary Poppins now, and we have to watch the movie every time they come to visit! Well anyway, they had actually rehearsed this play ahead of time. Now I don’t know what was going through their little minds, but they turned on some Mary Poppins music on their Kindle, and all they did was jump around, run back and forth, did some cartwheels, tumbles, used a hula hoop, made some weird arm movements, and smiled a lot. It made no sense, because the only connection to Mary Poppins was the music. But you could feel the energy they put into their presentation, and the concentration in their little minds as they tried to choreograph their movements, and I knew I was being given a special gift of love. And later, as they were getting into the car, to go home, I was just looking at them intently from the doorway, and John asked me if everything was okay, and what was I thinking. I said, “I was praying

boldly for them.” Yes, I was praying boldly for God to watch over them and protect them and guide them in all that they do as they grow up and go out into this crazy world.

Because, you see, I love my grandkids, just like you love your grandchildren and children, and I know God loves them and wants the best for them, but I also know that I need to pray to God confidently and expectantly about their lives. In some ways, it's like the song we sing with the children just before the children's message. *Jesus, be a fence all around me every day, Jesus I want you to protect me as I travel along the way.* Now someone in the congregation once told me they were uncomfortable with that song because, well, bad things can happen to good people, and to good children. And we don't want to give the children or ourselves any false hopes. And that's true. But I also believe that coming boldly before God in prayer, with humility and trust and faith does make a difference and opens the door for God to intervene and even change the course of our lives. Because that's the kind of relationship, the kind of prayer God wants. St. Paul understood this, when he wrote, “All glory be to God, who is able to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think, through his mighty power at work within us,” and the bold faith that we have.

Unfortunately, however, when it comes to praying, author and theologian, C.S. Lewis captures the feeling of many of us when he writes, “For most people, prayer is a duty and an irksome duty at that. Most people are reluctant to begin and delighted to finish.” Now I'm sure we've all had times in our lives when we could identify with that comment – times when we come reluctantly and our prayers are sterile, perfunctory, and we pray without any real passion or expectation. But why? Well, could it be that, because we feel that our prayers aren't answered in the time we want, or they aren't answered the way we want, that we've become accustomed to not expecting God to do anything when we pray? Therefore, praying becomes a duty, a chore. And you know what? That's a problem, and it's called doubt. It's called a lack of faith. It's called a lack of trust. We have to believe that not only does God have the power to do anything, but we also have to believe God can and will and wants do it for us!

Let's look at today's scripture. Here's Peter, imprisoned, chained, with four squads of four soldiers each guarding him, meaning that escape is virtually impossible, and therefore death is inevitable. In spite of that, however, the church, those early Christians, filled with the Holy Spirit, prayed boldly, expectantly for him. And, guess what! God intervenes and changes the course of Peter's life. However, here's where everyone falls short. Peter doesn't believe what is happening at first – he thinks he's dreaming,

until the angel leaves him and he finally realizes those prayers were answered. And then, when he shows up in person at Mary's house and knocks on the door, the servant girl Rhoda recognizes his voice and is overjoyed, but not really believing what's happening, she doesn't even open the door to let him in! And, to make matters worse, Mary and the others in the house who were praying for Peter don't believe Rhoda when she tells them he's just outside. They chide her, "You're out of your mind." Like I said earlier, apparently Christians do not believe in the power of prayer!

And yet, look at all the assurances Jesus gives us when we pray boldly. "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened." "The Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you could move mountains." "I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." "If you, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" This is the way God wants us to pray! Boldly!

Now what about those times when you have prayed boldly and expectantly, and the answer was not what you wanted? Well then, you can trust then that God has something different in store for you. That God has a different plan, a better plan, to grow you, to use you. Remember, Jesus prayed boldly in Gethsemane that he would not have to endure the cross, but God had a different plan, a much, much better plan.

You know, the phrase, "Nothing is impossible with God" appears only a few times in the Bible. In the Old Testament, in Genesis eighteen, a very old couple named Abraham and Sarah have no children. Sarah, in fact was way past the age of childbearing. One day a messenger from God comes to their tent and says, "You're going to conceive and have a son and from him will come a nation, and that nation will bless the whole world." Sarah laughs and says, "Who, me? Have a baby? With this old man of a husband?" But God says, "I'll be back about this time next year." It was so funny to her, that when she finally had her son, she named him Isaac, which means laughter. From Isaac came the nation we know as Israel. We talked a little bit about Israel last week, and how that nation has blessed the world by giving us moral and ethical standards by which we are to live. Nothing is impossible with God!

In Luke, we hear that Mary, an unmarried peasant girl is visited by a messenger from God who says, "You're going to have a child." "But I don't have a husband, I'm a virgin." "You're going to have a son

and he will bless the world.” And she did. And wherever he went, people’s hearts were lifted. They became kind and generous people. When people think of Jesus, they seek peace, they go the extra mile, they forgive, they show compassion, they love one another. All because the messenger said, “You will have a child and name him Jesus. Mary said, “I don’t understand.” But the angel replies, “Nothing is impossible with God.”

Brothers and sisters, if God can give a child to an old couple in a tent in Saudi Arabia and bless the world, if God can give a baby to a teenager in Palestine and bless the world, why should you ever give up or get down or despair or not trust. You see, nothing is impossible with God. Nothing.¹

And so today I want us all to pray boldly, and let God intervene in your life. You will find in your pews some note cards and pens. Please pass them down to the people beside you. And I invite you to write a word or two that describes something you need to pray about. Just one or two words because God knows what's on your mind. And bring it to the altar, and place it in the basket. Come boldly and expectantly before God with your prayer.

(Bring up prayers)

Offer a prayer.

Closing: And now, again from Paul: “All glory be to God, who is able to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think, through his mighty power at work within us,” and the bold faith that we have. Amen.

¹ Excerpts from *Nothing is Impossible with God*, Fred Craddock