

"Ordinary Prayers: Seeking to Love"

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

I Thessalonians 5: 12-18

October 26, 2008 (Stewardship Kick-off)

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I. Introduction

I had the chance to go over to Wesley Theological Seminary this week and hang out with Phil Potter at the President's Advisory Council to talk about stewardship in times of financial crisis. It was an interesting night, with lots of good discussion. One of the other panelists was a financial advisor from Ferris, Baker, Watts, who spoke very eloquently about the big picture as regards the stock market, and her expectation of a fairly mild recession.

And while that was helpful to hear *intellectually*, what I heard in the room *emotionally* was a lot of anxiety, which is something I have heard in a lot of places recently. I had dinner with several of my clergy colleagues the other night who were all talking about the plunge in the value of their retirement, and whether that would mean working longer than they planned. One talked about the biggest financial supporter of his church, who was a retiree giving out of their investment funds, and wondering how that would impact the church's budget.

Whether it's rational or not, there's a lot of fear in our national community about what the future holds. And even if, as individuals, we haven't lost a home or a job, the generalized anxiety causes all of us to lean towards pulling in and risking less. And on some level, that makes this a really bad time to do what we're doing today, which is kicking off a stewardship campaign.

But you know what? Stewardship campaigns are *always* about looking at where our true security really lies. They are *always* about trust. Which means that maybe this is exactly the time to have a stewardship campaign. With issues of trust at the forefront of our minds, maybe we can hear the message of healthy stewardship with new ears.

II. Stewardship

We live in the wealthiest nation in the history of the world. And that is an incredible blessing for many of us. But, as with all good things, that prosperity has got its dark side. And its dark side, is that when we have all the things we need, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that what we really need is God, and that all of the other stuff comes from God and is intended merely to point us to God.

Stewardship is the gift that we have been given to re-prioritize, to re-focus, and get everything in its right perspective. It is, in John Wesley's words, a "means of grace": one of the tools that God gives us to open up our lives to the powerful movement of the Holy Spirit. And John Wesley believed that healthy stewardship was at the heart of keeping our church alive and

vital. Without good stewardship, he said, Methodism would have the “form of religion, without its power,” because our affluence would sap our spiritual vigor.

Healthy stewardship has a number of components, and one of those elements, as we discussed in last year’s stewardship campaign, is that healthy stewardship is always *sacrificial*. For our giving to open us up to the movement of the spirit, it needs to feel a little uncomfortable, a little risky. That’s going to be a different amount for each of us; but if we’re not stretching ourselves, our giving is not going to be doing what it could be for us.

Another element of healthy giving, that we’re going to focus on this year, is the idea of commitment. I don’t care how committed you *feel* to something – or someone – when you put pen to paper, or make that commitment in a public, explicit way, something changes. That’s why we get married, because all of a sudden, the nature of our commitment changes; and it’s in the context of *that* commitment that growth happens.

Next month, when we have our commitment Sunday, I want to encourage all of you, particularly those of you who have never taken that step, to consider making a pledge to the church. I think it will change your whole relationship to the church, and – hopefully – to God. Pray about it.

III. Prayer

And speaking of prayer, prayer is going to be the focus of our time together during this stewardship campaign. “Now what does prayer have to do with stewardship?” you may be asking yourself. Quite a bit, as it happens.

First, of course, they’re both spiritual disciplines – means of grace – tools to open us up to the movement of the Holy Spirit. So, in that respect, they can only reinforce each other, make each other stronger. The goal of both prayer and stewardship is to express *love*, love of God and love of neighbor. Prayer, of course, gives us the opportunity to explicitly invite God into every situation in our lives, to transform and change it. But stewardship can help us broaden what it means to pray in some very powerful ways.

Most of the time, when we talk about prayer, we think about talking to God; and too often, we think of asking God for something. Many of you probably remember Flip Wilson, who was a wonderful comedian in the 70’s, and who often poked fun at religion. He would sometimes say “I’m gonna pray now, anybody want anything?” Now I’m grateful that that’s not where most of us are regarding prayer. For one thing, we’ve talked over the past year about prayer as listening, and Sandy will talk a little bit about that next Sunday, when she preaches about silence.

But I want to broaden even that understanding, and start thinking about prayer not merely as something we *do*, but as a way of *being*. In our passage from Thessalonians this morning, Paul admonishes us to “Pray without ceasing,” a call that pretty intentionally blurs the boundary

between the *activity* of prayer and the way we live the rest of our lives. Paul seems to be challenging us to think about our entire lives as prayer.

In the book of Romans, Paul shares these words, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” He seems to be affirming that prayer, like everything in our spiritual life, is initiated by God: a response to the hidden workings of the Spirit within us. So that the Spirit prays within us and our task then, in the words of Marjorie Thompson, “is to attune ourselves to the conversation already going on in our hearts.”

You’ll notice that I’ve entitled this sermon series “Ordinary Prayer.” And I took this term “ordinary” from Benedictine spirituality, in which the term refers to encountering God in the “ordinary,” everydayness of our lives. One of the great insights of monastic spirituality is that God is not most readily found in the dramatic or heroic moments of our life, but in the stuff of everyday living. Think of Elijah on Mt. Horeb, “but the LORD was not in the wind, ... or in the earthquake, ... or the fire; [but in] the still small voice.” Norvene Vest writes, “Many Christians would generously die heroically for Christ – but little daily deaths are harder to accept,” the deaths of submission and repentance.

She goes on “In response to an irate demand, can we speak lovingly? When we have made a mistake, do we defend ourselves and blame others, or are we willing to admit our error and apologize? When we begin a new task, do we depend on our own strength or do we ask God’s help? ... How do we care for old clothes or garden tools? ... It matters very much what each of us does with daily choices.” And *that*, Friends, is where prayer and stewardship tie together.

IV. Journaling

As we close our time together, I want to share with you a gift: a devotional and journal that your amazing stewardship team has produced to be with you throughout this stewardship campaign and – hopefully – beyond. In 1735, John Wesley was reading a wonderful book called *Rules for Holy Living and Dying*, by an Anglican Bishop named Jeremy Taylor (who lived about a hundred years before Wesley). In that book, Wesley came across the advice that in growing spiritually, “we shall be much assisted ... if, before we sleep each night, we examine the actions of the past day with a particular scrutiny.”

Wesley took those words to heart and began that year keeping a journal, a discipline that he maintained for the rest of his life. And it was an incredibly powerful gift to him, as he reflected back to see where the Holy Spirit was moving in his life and guiding him. Earlier this year, on Children’s Sunday, we had four of our sixth-graders give us brief homilies. Emily Vogt, in her sermon, told us, “I decided to do my sermon on how sometimes in the scriptures and in modern day experiences you can’t always find meaning right then. We have to give ourselves time to reflect back and realize what the situation meant to us.”

One of our greatest gifts in that effort is the gift of journaling. If love is the final goal of prayer, self understanding is essential if we are to grow in love. And journals are incredible tools to foster self-understanding. Many of you commented on how helpful the devotional was that we produced last year for the stewardship campaign; we have included another devotional in the front of the journal and then extra pages, in the hope that you might consider beginning a spiritual journal during this next month, and then continue it as you move into the coming year.

You can pick up your journals on the way out of the sanctuary today. And we are very blessed that our own Betty Rogers has agreed to teach a session on journaling as a spiritual discipline after both services on November 9th. Please pick up a journal on the way out, use the devotional during the next month, and begin to explore journaling as a spiritual discipline. You might find, like John Wesley, that it will change your life.

V. Conclusion

Friends, we are in the midst of a traumatic period as a nation. Many people are experiencing real hardship in the form of the loss of homes or the loss of jobs. Many others are having to re-evaluate their retirement. And even for those of us who don't have that trauma, there is a sense of vulnerability that can be almost debilitating. The only answer to that fear is the realization that our God is still the One who is in control.

In our passage from Deuteronomy, we have the powerful words of the *Shema* – “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is God alone, and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Stewardship and prayer are both incredibly powerful gifts that God has given us to teach us how to love God with everything that we have and everything that we are. And as John teaches us “perfect love casts out fear.”

Amen.