

"Ask Like You Mean It"

Last week in both the newsletter and in worship Sunday, I asked you all on behalf of the Session to begin a period of forty days of prayer. This is because Jesus' spent forty days in the wilderness with God where he prepared himself for his earthly ministry. The *purpose of our* time of prayer is to be very intentional about seeking God's will for the future of Nazareth Presbyterian with regards to two important issues. One is a decision that will be made corporately and the other a decision that will be made within our own families. And we are praying for both decisions to be guided by the will of God.

The first concerns who should be elected to serve on the very important Pastoral Nominating Committee. This committee is to be representational of all ages, genders, and interests in our congregation. But more importantly, the individuals who form this group should be Spirit filled people who are willing to seek and to follow the will of God as they search for the pastor that God has already chosen for this congregation. The second concerns your personal decisions about the contribution of your time, talents and resources to the body of Christ, the Church.

But the Session decided that the underlying word in our time of praying together would be **INTENTIONAL**. This means that our prayers are to be done deliberately, purposefully, in a preplanned way. Now, I don't know about the rest of you, but my prayer life is all over the place. I pray in the car, in the bathtub, while I am cooking dinner. I pray with songs. I pray with images. Sometimes I pray "popcorn" prayers when thoughts or needs pop into my mind. Sometimes I pray what I call 9-1-1 prayers, which are prayers of desperation for someone I love

or myself. And of course, I pray before visiting someone in the hospital or writing a sermon and other things that are a part of my calling as a minister. But to be intentional about a specific prayer concern every day, I have had to be – well- intentional!

So I am using a book. The book is actually called 40 Days of Prayer: Preparing Ourselves for God's Calling and in one of the readings for this week, the author Mark Tidsworth brought to my attention this passage in the gospel of Mark. Did you all follow what happened? After Jesus had preached his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth, Mark tells us that he was completely rejected by his own family – his brothers and sisters. Their attitude was basically – who do you think you are, anyway. You are just a carpenter's son – what makes you think that you are all that and a bag of chips?

But the thing that I had never noticed in this story, the thing that Mark Tidsworth brought to my mind because I was trying to be intentional is that, because of their lack of faith in Jesus, he was unable to heal that day. Can that be right? Was Jesus, the living God, limited because of the unbelief of his people? Well, apparently so.

This seems so incredulous to me. That my willingness to serve could actually affect the outcome of God's mission. I even reread the text thinking that surely it said that Jesus "DID NOT HEAL" but the Gospel writer tells us that Jesus "could do no deed of power there, except to lay hands on a few and heal them." Tidsworth then goes on to explain, "For some reason, God wanted to include disciples in God's mission of redemption and transformation." Which means that OUR trust and faith in God can actually influence the success of God's work!

And when you think of it that way, of course the attitude of those who were with Jesus that day had an effect on his outcome. Surely the fully human Jesus was hurt that his own

brothers and sisters had so little faith in him. In fact, Mark says that he was amazed at their unbelief.

But you and I have the advantage of knowing that Jesus would go from that place as fully Divine to become the risen savior for us all. What an unbelievable honor that the God who *has* done and *continues to do* so much for each of us here wants us to be in partnership in his ministry. And friends, I believe that the best way to be in partnership with God is through prayer.

So I began searching for some guidance on how to be certain that my prayers are in accordance with the will of God. And the Holy Spirit plopped me down in the middle of the Letter of James, a book I have NEVER preached from! The authorship of James is up for grabs, according to everything that I read, but the message is clear. The people to whom James wrote were seeking spiritual maturity to be able to handle the trails of life. And in their quest to be more like the disciples that God needed in their sacred partnership, James tells them what to pray for: WISDOM. And that is exactly what we need during this time in the life of our church.

Wisdom is something that I am always seeking. And it is not the same as knowledge. One of the commentaries I used said that knowledge is the ability to take things apart. Wisdom, however, is the ability to put things back together. Therefore, wisdom is right use of knowledge. So while many of us may be smart, fewer of us are wise.

But another story came to my mind about the difference between wisdom and knowledge that is even more descriptive. It's the story of the day that Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. After a good meal and a bottle of wine, they lay down for the night and went to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend. "Watson, look up and tell me what you see."

Watson replied, "I see millions and millions of stars." "And what does that tell you?" Holmes asked. Watson pondered for a minute and then in a great display of knowledge said: "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is about quarter past 3. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Why? What does it tell YOU?" Holmes was silent for a minute and then replied in great wisdom, "Someone has stolen our tent."

So while knowledge is important, wisdom is imperative when it comes to discerning the will of God. We may have knowledge of the facts about God. We may be able to quote the words of the Scripture. But to apply their meaning to our lives and our sacred partnership with God, we must have wisdom.

Then James goes on to clarify that there are two things we must remember when we ask for wisdom. The first is thing to remember is *how* God gives. Because friends, we worship a God who gives generously. God gave us a beautiful creation full of color and imagination. God gives us people to help us along life's path. God gives us his word so that we can remember our history and learn how to react to the stories that we are living in today. God gives us salvation through the gift of his Son. And God gives all of this with no motive for receiving. God gives only out of love.

But the other thing James wants to remind us of is how the asker must ask. And that is without doubt. God wants us to be sure of both God's power AND God's desire to give so we are instructed to ask for wisdom with complete belief that God will give it. In other words, it is God's privilege to give wisdom as a gift but it is our responsibility to ask for it in faith. And I

believe that this might be the biggest roadblock in our prayer life. We pray, but we do not pray expectantly. In fact, minister Warren Wiersbe says that the greatest enemy to answered prayer is disbelief.

How often do we pray because someone else is listening or because we know we should or because we made a promise to, but in our hearts we feel that what we are praying for is a miracle that will not happen? James makes it clear that we are to ask in faith, never doubting. And I think here we find a great paradox. On the one hand, James tells those without wisdom to pray for it. On the other, God only responds to the prayers of those whose hearts are connected to God's ways. So when we pray as if we are seeking God's will, but we believe in our hearts that we already know what that will is or how God will answer our prayers, we are simply giving lip service to God. James is clear that this does not honor God in any way.

Shortly after Dallas Theological Seminary was founded in 1924, it almost came to the point of bankruptcy. All the creditors were going to foreclose at noon on a particular day. That morning the leaders of the Seminary met with President Dr. Chafer in his office for prayer that God would provide. One man present, a man named Harry Ironside, offered this prayer: "Lord, we know that the cattle on a thousand hills are Thine. Please sell some of them and send us the money." Many would consider this prayer ridiculous, but it was prayed expectantly, with great faith.

While they were praying, a tall Texan with boots on stepped up to the business office and said, "I just sold two carloads of cattle and I feel compelled to give the money to the seminary. I don't know if you need it or not, but here's a check." A secretary took the check and, knowing how critical things were, timidly interrupted the meeting. Dr. Chafer took the check that she held out in her hand and saw that it was for the exact amount of debt that was owed! When he

looked at the name, he recognized the cattleman in Ft. Worth, and turning to Dr. Ironside said, “Harry, God sold the cattle!” Surely the God who created the universe can answer any prayer and wants us to ask as if we really believe in His power.

But in the end, I think that James is telling us to pray in a way that makes us vulnerable to God's answer. And perhaps that is the definition of faith. It may sound very complicated but James makes it very simple. Start where you are and trust God to move you forward, knowing that God honors the prayers made in accordance with God's will. So James tells us that it is our job to ask in faith, fully believing in the generosity of God to answer, and then leave the rest to Him. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.