

DISCERNING OUR CONGREGATION'S FUTURE: THROUGH PRAYER

Jeremiah 8:18-9:11; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 23, 2001

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Last week many of us talked more than usual to spouse and loved ones - talked about the terrorist attacks. We talked about how some of the air passengers and some of the victims in the Trade Towers were able to call loved ones and tell them, "I love you." But we also talked about all those innocent people killed, many of whom never had a chance to say a final word, to say I love you. And after we talked, hopefully we assured one another of our love.

When we love someone we want to communicate. Communication takes many forms. I heard last week that over 75% of communication is non-verbal. Facial expressions, hand motions, hugs, kisses express love. Frowns and furled brows express worry or anger. Two people who love one another can sit together in the same room or in a car without speaking and yet still communicate. But if we don't use any words we begin to wonder. Tevye in Fiddler on the roof asks his wife, "Do you love me?" She answers: "I wash your clothes, I cook your meals, I mend your shirts. What do you mean, 'Do I love you?'" We long, not just for actions but words. Actions alone don't cut the ice. We tell our kids, "I love you" and we wait for them to say, "I love you too." We communicate in many ways - but words certainly are one of the most important ways we communicate.

Prayer is communicating with the God we love. God is the source of the great river of love. God is "the love that moves the sun and the other stars." We're able to love one another only because God first loved us. And if we love God we'll want to talk with God. We don't always need words to communicate with God. Sometimes sighs and tears communicate. But God also longs to hear us speak to him, to say, "I love you." As just as many families talked

with one another last week about our nation and the terrorists attack God wants us to talk with him about these events. Tuesday evening of the attack our sanctuary was filled with people most of whom I had never seen before. The prayer service had been hastily called and publicized by word of mouth and email and radio. But people came because in times like this, more than ever, we realize we need a savior. My sermon is about prayer and how prayer shapes us as Christians. Prayer enables us to discern God's will for our future. Prayer brings us more and more in tune with the world God loves and Christ died to save. Let's talk about prayer. Prayer is talking with God.

In Paul's first letter to his young minister friend, Timothy, he urges him "that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

Paul urges Timothy (and us) to develop a prayer list. Have you ever used a prayer list? We have a partial prayer list in our bulletin. (Read all the names). A prayer list is like a grocery list. It reminds you what to do. For example, this list (A) reminds me what I want to buy (a case of Pepsi One, heads of lettuce, tomatoes, cereal and skim milk). But look at this list (B). The first list is for me. This one is for my family. (Milk, eggs, bread, yogurt, lunch meat, pancake mix

Now think about who you pray for. Your list might look like this (C). (Spouse, children, parents, loved ones, pets, soap box opera characters). You may add the names of the people in the bulletin. Now look at this list (D). (Everyone. Kings. All who are in high positions.) It includes all the names from your list, and also so many more. This list could be very long. Two

words summarize the list: "all people." the first list was made by you. It includes the people you love and care about. The second list is God's list. It includes everyone God loves and cares about.

Paul says there are three reasons why we should pray for all people. First, and most important: *God loves all people and wants all people to be saved.* Christ gave himself to be the Savior of all people. If we pray only for those whom we love, we might have a short list. If we pray for all whom God loves, we have a long list.

The second reason we pray for all people is that praying for *some* people helps *other* people. For example, if you pray for the president or others in authority, you're also praying for all the people whose lives will be affected by his decisions - soldiers, sailors, airmen as well as all the citizens of our nation. Also, if you pray for teachers, doctors and nurses, business people, police, fire fighters, parents, you're praying not only for those individuals but for all the students teachers teach; all the doctors' and nurses' patients; all the employees and customers business people deal with; all the people police and fire fighters are supposed to protect; and all the children of parents.

Finally, we are to pray for all people because *all people need our prayers.* This list (D) shows us only a few. Notice that you don't have to know a person's name to pray. You can pray for many people because you know they are there. You know they need God's help, and you know God wants to help them. When you ask him to help, He may ask you to help him answer your prayer.

When you're praying, use a prayer list. But use the list that God made. Pray for the victims of the terrorist attacks and pray also for innocent Afghans, mothers, children, innocent people simply trying to eke out a living in an unforgiving land. Pray for the United States

Congress and pray for the Taliban. Pray for President Bush and pray for Osama Bin Laden. These people are making critical decisions, even this day, which will affect so many.

Karl Barth use to say that ministers should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Meaning - that we are read the news in the light of the Word of God. We are to bring to bear the Word of God on the events of history. And, on the other hand, we are to read the Bible in the light of world events. In the same way, I urge you to pray with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. I urge you to pray while you're watching network news as well as when you come to church. Personally, I find it best to pray early in the morning using my Bible and our Mission Yearbook of Prayer. I urge you to find a time every day to pray. I urge you to pray with your families before meals. I urge you to pray for your children before they leave for school. I urge you to pray with them before they go to bed.

Pray as well for the countless victims of AIDS in Africa. God will hear our prayers, and lead us to ways of becoming involved in the issue.

Pray for the numerous neglected children of our community. God will listen, and open our eyes to opportunities to serve as a tutor or a mentor.

Pray for the multitudes that have never heard the name of Christ. God will hear our concerns, and show us ways to support the spreading of the gospel.

Pray. Pray. Pray. Pray that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

*we've done that for Tuesday - Friday. Normally - 5 people
let's not go back to normal*

IS THIS NORMAL?

Four thousand gathered for mid-day prayer in a downtown cathedral.
A New York City church, filled and emptied six times last Tuesday.
The owner of a Manhattan tennis shoe store threw open his doors,
and gave running shoes to those fleeing the towers.
People stood in lines to give blood,
in hospitals to treat the sick,
in sanctuaries to pray for the wounded.
America was different this week.
We wept for people we did not know.
We sent money to families we've never seen.
Talk-show hosts read Scriptures,
journalists printed prayers.
Our focus shifted from fashion hemlines and box scores,
to orphans and widows and the future of the world.
We were different this week:
Republicans stood next to Democrats,
Catholics prayed with Jews.
Mexicans and Norte Americanos were brother Americans,
Skin color was covered by the ash of burning towers.
This is a different country than it was a week ago.
We're not as self-centered as we were.
We're not as self-reliant as we were.
Hands are out.
Knees are bent.
This is not normal.
And I have to ask the question,
Do we want to go back to normal?
Are we being given a glimpse of a new way of life?
Are we, as a nation, being reminded that the enemy is not each other
and the power is not in ourselves
and the future is not in our bank accounts?
Unselfish prayerfulness is the way GOD intended for us to live all along.
Maybe this, in his eyes, is the way we are called to live our entire
lives.
And perhaps the best response to this tragedy is to refuse to go back to
normal.
Perhaps the best response is to follow the example of Tom Burnett.
He was a passenger of flight 93.
Minutes before the plane crashed in the fields of Pennsylvania
he reached his wife by cell phone.
We're all going to die, he told her,
but there are three of us who are going to do something about it.
We can do something about it as well.
We can resolve to care more.
We can resolve to Pray more.
And we can resolve that,
with GOD being our helper,
we'll never go back to normal again.