

Beloved & Baptized: Now What? (Prayers)

1st Sunday in Lent - February 21, 2010, Leonard Eberhart

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-16; Romans 10: 8b-13; Luke 4: 1-13

A terrible tragedy occurred in Dunblane, Scotland, in March of 1996. In a random act of violence, a man from the community entered the local school and used his gun to murder sixteen kindergartners and their teacher. John Drane, a clergyman, tells of his experience with prayer immediately after the shootings.

“I made my way to the school gates. As I approached, the street outside the school was deserted apart from a handful of police officers and a gang of youths aged about 17-20. As I watched, they took out from their pockets sixteen candles and kneeling on the damp pavement, arranged them in a circle and then lit them with cigarette lighters. They stood around the candles for a moment, then one of them said: ‘I suppose someone should say something.’ As they wondered how to do it, one of them spotted me, identified me as a minister, and called me over with the words; ‘You’ll know what to say.’ Of course, the reality was quite different. As I stood there, tears streaming down my face, I had no idea what to say or how to say it. So we stood, holding on to one another for a moment and then I said a brief prayer. That was the catalyst. A question came first. ‘What kind of world is this?’ Another asked; ‘Is there any hope?’ Someone said: ‘I wish I could trust God.’

‘I’ll need to change,’ said a fourth one. As he did, he glanced over his shoulder at the police. He reached into his pocket, and I could see he had a knife. He knelt by the ring of candles and quietly said: ‘I’ll not be needing this now’ as he tucked it under some of the flowers lying nearby. One of the others produced a piece of bicycle chain and did the same. We stood silently for a moment and then went our separate ways.”¹

What are the transforming moments you’ve experienced in life? More and more lately when the direction for how to proceed isn’t clear, I’ve come to depend upon the promise, assurance and empowerment of my baptism. The short version of what it means to be baptized is: I’m deeply loved by God AND commissioned to share that love as generously as I’ve received it. Our church motto is: “Living, Loving, Sharing God’s Word”. That Divine Word is summed up in the four letter expression: LOVE.

The mission of the UMC is to make disciples of Jesus Christ who help transform the world. When we join the church we make a covenant to participate in this disciple making and transformation process in five specific ways: We say we will “support the ministry of the UMC through our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness” (this fifth dimension was added at the last General Conference). Today I’m beginning a five week sermon series on these five parts of our membership covenant. It is my hope and prayer that by thinking about these dimensions of our membership covenant we will be better prepared to hear and act on God’s dream for us as a church and a people.

I am convinced that it was no accident that this membership covenant list begins with prayer. I’m equally convinced that the practice of prayer is key to the mission of the greater UMC and Grinnell UMC because prayer is so primary to the transformation process. The story John Drane tells isn’t the exception. If anything, we simply haven’t paid attention to the ways God has often dramatically answered prayer. The senseless tragedy in Scotland brought a group of young people together who were moved by prayer in that candle lit darkness and left the place as different people. Their prayer led them to surrender their instruments of violence and to commit to a new way of being in the world. The impact of prayer in this story is crystal clear, and the story is a parable conveying the power of prayer in the world. People who pray are themselves transformed. People who pray participate in transforming the world. More clearly to the point, God transforms the world through people who pray.

Even though we call ourselves a Christian nation, I fear the reality is that many do not pray and have not experienced the power of prayer in and through their lives. Sadly, the same can be said of many of us

¹“Promises to Keep: A Study of the Meaning of Membership in the UMC”, p. 11

connected to the church. Annie Dillard, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, challenges the “functional atheism” she observes in the church. She says: “Why do people in churches seem like cheerful tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? Does anyone have the slightest idea of the power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are like children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear straw hats to church. We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares. They should lash us to our pews!”

“Do we have the slightest idea of the power we so blithely invoke?” Do we believe that God is at work in our lives and in our world? Do we want God to change us? Do we believe that God can change the world through us?

Richard Foster’s take is: “Prayer is the central avenue God uses to change us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives.”² People who are content with things as they are - who have grown comfortable with the status quo - are not typically fervent in prayer. The opposite is also true. Those who believe that God is active in the world are praying people. So perhaps the best way to discern our answer to Dillard’s challenge is to measure our practice of prayer. Is prayer the cornerstone of our worship and spiritual formation? Do we gather together with our brothers and sisters in Christ to pray for one another, for our church and for the world? Are we, as individuals, intentional about prayer in our daily lives?

In all fairness, we do have some meaningful prayer practices. Just yesterday we had an 11 hour prayer vigil here at the church. When we gather in committees we begin with a time to share joys and concerns and then participate in a time of prayer. 78 persons are members of the prayer chain. Worship each week has a variety of liturgical prayers as well as silent time for more personal expressions. I know many of you practice regular disciplines of prayer and spiritual formation. All these practices however only provide some of the basic spiritual infrastructure for our faith journey.

When describing the place of worship, Jesus said: *My house is to be a house of prayer for all people.*” (Mark 11:17) Several years ago we spent the summer reading, reflecting upon and practicing the principles of prayer. We were inspired by Jim Cymbala’s book, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*. Cymbala asserts that we have made God’s house a house of preaching and a house of religious programming. What will it take for us to help Jesus’ characterization be more fully realized - that this is to be a “house of prayer for all people”?

I’m humbled and inspired by a man in the community who regularly comes up the ramp and enters the sanctuary. He will sit in the pew for a few quiet moments in what appears to be a prayerful stance and then is on his way. It’s as if when ever he walks by the church he is compelled to participate in what these stones were originally erected to be - namely, a “house of prayer for all people.”

One of the outcomes of our summer of prayer a few years ago was a very basic tool called a prayer journal. It was very simple. Each page contained two entries. At the top was a place to enter the date and record prayer request or petition. At mid page was a place to enter the date and a space to reveal how God answered the prayer. I confess to you that I did use such a journal that summer, but after a time I neglected the practice. I got too busy and haven’t paid adequate attention to God’s faithful, consistent, grace filled, merciful, active replies.

Relationship with God is always exciting because it’s always dynamic. God always journeys to meet us where we are. It doesn’t matter whether we have prayed since the day we learned to speak or whether we have never uttered a prayer – the invitation comes. God invites us to open our hearts, to talk and to listen, to speak and to be silent, to lift up our cries and the concerns of the world. No matter where we are on the journey, we will feel like beginners however.

Thomas Merton, spiritual guide and retreat leader, once said, “We don’t enjoy being beginners, but let us be

²Foster, Richard, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s Home*, 1992

convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners all of our lives.”³ Where prayer is concerned, we need not let our “beginner status” prevent us from taking the initiative. There are no masters or professionals where prayer is concerned. So, no matter where we find ourselves on our journey of faith, God comes to us and invites us to open ourselves to be changed and to be change-agents, to be transformed and to participate in transforming the world. Prayer is the gift God has given us – to connect to the Power which makes transformation possible.

In the last year or so, I’ve been inviting leaders of the congregation to join me in a radical prayer: “Lord help us to understand your dream for GUMC and prepare us for what you have in mind for us next.” It’s felt like we’ve wandered in the wilderness for some time. In the past couple of weeks however it’s as if God’s Spirit has been ignited among us. In four separate gatherings (a staff meeting, Finance and Worship Committees and the Administrative Council this past Tues.) the conversation centered on how to do a better job of being a loving community? At the Council meeting the direction crystalized even more, expressed in one word: CONNECT. Our conversation focused on how we are called to connect with one another - practice hospitality, let people know they are missed when we don’t see them in worship, communicate that they are beloved - in other words, live as though we believed in our baptism!

The empowerment of any and all of these varied connections is prayer. Unless we sincerely, intentionally give individual and corporate prayer priority in our life, we will be aimless and lifeless. Participating in a vital practice of prayer is like having the electrical power flowing into the building. We can live in the building without electricity, but such living is substantially less than the potential God intends.

Your homework this week is to take time to reflect on your prayer life. The insert provides a place to begin. Then I want to encourage you to visit with others to hear their stories of God at work in their lives and especially listen for how God answered prayer. CONNECT with others at every opportunity so that when you ponder today’s sermon title: Beloved & Baptized: Now What?, you will have a testimony to share of God at work in you, transforming the world.⁴

My Prayer Journal

Date: _____ Dear God, my prayer of petition, concern, expression of need today is

Date: _____ God’s answer to my prayer was

³“Promises to Keep: A Study of the Meaning of Membership in the UMC”, p. 12

⁴I’m very grateful for the faithful work done by Bishop Gregory Palmer, the Reverends Scott Kober and Jill Sanders and their insightful writing in *Promises to Keep: A Study of Membership in the United Methodist Church* as a primary resource for this sermon series: “Beloved & Baptized: Now What?”

