

The St. John's Pulpit

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PRAYING WITHOUT GOALS

Jeremiah 29:10-14 and Gospel of Luke 22:39-42

Eighth Sunday in Kingdomtide, October 22, 2017

Sermon 3 of 3 in Series: 'On Being a Sent People – Exodus, Exile or Exploration?'

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H.G. Wells was writing science fiction before the term was invented. He told a story about a child who ventures through a door in a garden wall and finds a world where everything and everyone is living in true harmony and joy. For the rest of that child's life, he longs to find that door again, but it has disappeared it seems. Three or four times during his adulthood, he catches a glimpse of it unexpectedly – but he always has something urgent to attend to and lets the moment go. He becomes a very good man, gains success and is a worthwhile citizen benefiting society; yet he is constantly haunted in his private self for allowing something so precious to slip away.

Professional literature of today refers to our growing need for 'white space' in our lives. White space is a graphic design element that lets the other elements on the page breathe; reduces tension between everything on the page; allows the most important information to come to the top of your vision; and provides for the essential balance and harmony for you to connect new information with what you already know. We need 'white space' on the pages of our lives.

Robert Browning wrote about "*an inmost center in ourselves where truth abides in fullness.*"

Beloved, as a pastoral preacher, my calling from God includes equipping you to be Ministers in Daily Life as you offer healthy theology to other people. Each person – every one of us and every person you meet - carries their own stories of sin, disappointment, failure, tragedy, doubt, grief, pain, regret, abuse, guilt, mistreatment, humiliation, shame, ignorance, embarrassment and other adventures of learning by experience as an imperfect human. As you live in the world as Ministers in Daily Life, you offer healthy theology to others, living as Christ's Church in the world and increasing the health and vitality of our life together as an actively faithful servant community. Your commitments to God and to God's mission for the world through Christ's Church influence our community and beyond.

Prayer is the experience God provides for you to create white space in your living. Through prayer, you catch glimpses of that door in the garden wall offering harmony and renewal through God's truth - a vision of peace – shalom. However, in our chaotic world, it can be difficult to pray. There is so much sick theology being offered that our prayers often seem to be merely another noise in the cacophony.

Leslie Weatherhead, in his little book, *The Will of God*, offers us good theology. He helps us by naming the confusion which occurs when the phrase, ‘will of God,’ is used loosely. He offers ICU: The Intentional Will of God; The Circumstantial Will of God; and The Ultimate Will of God.

The Intentional Will of God is God’s ideal plan for God’s creation. God is always pouring out love, blessing, grace, mercy, goodness, etc. Yet, God has not created humanity as robots and nature itself can bring tragedy and suffering. It is unfortunate that insurance companies use the phrase, “act of God” to describe what is DEFINITELY NOT an act of The Intentional Will of God. God never intends to bring misery. Yet, misery visits us nonetheless. And, when it does,...

The Circumstantial Will of God steps into circumstances offering salvation, healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption, hope, and so on. When Jesus suffered death on the cross, it was not the Intentional Will of God. Yet, God redeemed that moment and raised Jesus from the grave. Jesus did not die like a trapped animal, but with trust in the faithfulness of The Living God. His trust in God’s faithfulness was the basis for his promise to the criminal, “*Today, you will be with me in paradise.*”

The Ultimate Will of God is what Weatherhead calls “*God’s final realization of God’s purposes.*” He refers to Romans 8:28; “*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.*”

Beloved, the world is rampant with sick theology, sin, apathy, and a need for hope.

The world needs churches like St. John’s to offer a loving God to the world.

The only way the world will become less violent is for us to offer a less violent God to the world.

The world needs you to be committed to Jesus as Lord of your faith and to be good theology people.

The world needs you to be good news people in a bad news world.

The world needs you to be formed by God’s saving love, informed by God’s gracious truth and transformed by God’s life-giving hope.

The world needs you be reminded of what you know, enlightened as to what you may not yet know and encouraged to be living witnesses of what you experience as God’s redeeming salvation.

Like every generation before you, you are living in changing times. You are a people of commitment living among people who are guided more by discretion and distraction than by commitment and persevering focus. As part of the people of God who follow Jesus, you live among people whose identity is seemingly confused and constantly shifting according to the latest Instagram.

At times, when you consider the challenge of living as the people of God through rapidly changing times, you can become like Frodo in Lord of the Rings who said, “*I wish the Ring had never come to me.*” Of course, wise Gandalf responded, “*So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for you to decide. All you have to decide is what to do with the time given to you.*”

I offer two ways for you to pray in these changing times given to you. Learn to pray with goals AND learn to pray without goals.

1. LEARN TO PRAY WITH GOALS. Jesus prayed! His disciples were so impressed by his life of prayer they asked him to teach them how to pray. Each Sunday, we pray the prayer Jesus taught those disciples. This model prayer has goals:

“Thy kingdom come...NOT OURS” “Thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven...NOT THE WAY OUR WILL IS DONE ON EARTH” “Give us this day our daily bread...NOT EVERYTHING WE THINK WE MUST HAVE” “Forgive us – IN DIRECT PROPORTION TO HOW WE FORGIVE OTHERS...” “Lead us – WE DON’T HANDLE TEMPTATION WELL...” “Deliver us – ESPECIALLY FROM EVIL THAT TRIES TO CONTROL OUR LIVES...” You should have goals when you pray.

Matthew 7 records another teaching of Jesus about prayer: *“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”*

Some people have wrongly interpreted this teaching of Jesus. They try to turn God into a divine dispensary; a goal granting gumball machine. However, Jesus is teaching how humans learn about the nature of God. These words, ‘Ask, Seek and Knock,’ are present imperatives in the Greek language. It is better to read this passage saying, *“Keep on asking... Continue searching... Persevere in your knocking;”* NOT SO YOU GET WHAT YOU WANT BUT UNTIL YOU ARE ASKING FOR WHAT YOU NEED. Like a child asking for bread or fish, God will not give you anything less than what God knows you need to get you through your situation.

Proverbs 3:6 is a good word to remember: *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to God, and God will make your paths straight.”*

Psalms 37:4 teaches, *“Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”*

Proverbs 16:1-3 offers this instruction: *“The plans of the mind belong to mortals, but the answer of the prayer is from the LORD. All one’s ways may be pure in one’s own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirit. Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established.”*

CONSIDER THAT PRAYING WITH GOALS SHOULD BE LIKE A VINE AND BRANCHES.
FOR, AS YOU TRUST THE FAITHFUL LIVING GOD,
YOU GROW TO BECOME COMMITTED TO THAT TO WHICH GOD IS COMMITTED, and
YOUR RELATIONSHIPS BEAR THE FRUIT OF THOSE COMMITMENTS, and
YOUR VALUES MATURE TO REFLECT WHAT GOD VALUES, and
YOUR VISIONS EXPAND TO ALIGN WITH GOD’S VISIONS, and
YOUR PLANS BRANCH OFF THE PLANS GOD HAS FOR YOU AND THE WORLD, and
YOUR GOALS DEVELOP TO IMPLEMENT THE WILL OF GOD FOR HUMANITY.
YES, LEARN TO PRAY WITH GOALS! AND....

2. LEARN TO PRAY WITHOUT GOALS. While it is not evil to be a goal-oriented person, some people take their goal setting a bit too far. You may remember the line of Emily Blunt's character in The Devil Wears Prada: *"I'm just one stomach flu away from my goal weight."*

As we have noted the past few weeks, the people of God living in Babylonian exile had a goal of going back to yesterday. Jeremiah spoke the message of God to them, saying, *"Surely, I know the plans I have for you...plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."*

Consider Martin Luther's words: ***"Prayer is climbing UP into the heart of God."*** What does the world look like from inside the heart of God? What does your life situation look like from inside the heart of God? St. John's, God has plans for you; plans for your health, vitality and shalom and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. At times, take a blank slate to God and let God give you goals.

Some people seem to be quite confused about the will of God during these changing times. There are always some individuals, groups and movements who use the name of God, quote scripture and twist around the character of God to support their self-serving goals, strategies and plans. They convince themselves that what is good for them is best. But, you are people who do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. You understand Ralph Waldo Emerson's words: *"God evidently does not intend us all to be rich, or powerful, or great, but God does intend us all to be friends."*

As Jesus knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane, he let go of his goals to orient his life with God's orientation. As a child, Jesus studied the Exodus and the Exile. Jesus trusted God and knew God would make a victorious way through any situation. Jesus did not live his life trying to create an atmosphere that would result in suffering for himself or his followers. Yet, he upset the power players who protected their religious institution from God. They were goal oriented; but their ways were not God's ways. As we know on this side of Jesus' empty tomb, God is always bringing life out of death.

Jesus had two goals in his ministry: to reveal the loving character and will of God and to create a new community that would love God, love neighbor and love one another. Notice the phrase in today's Gospel reading: "Jesus went, as was his custom, to...his place of prayer." Rabbi Jesus, the Teacher, is showing you here that your place of prayer is more than a chair in a quiet corner. Your place of prayer is **your customary place** where you go to let go of all your goals and then pick them up again in the white space of God's Truth. **In his garden prayer, Jesus climbed up into the heart of God expressing the will to will God's will.**

Whatever is causing you chaos today, fear not. Climb up into the heart of God and hear God's message, *"I have plans for you, never for harm - always for hope."* Amen & Amen.