

The St. John's Pulpit

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PRAYER: A KEY TO SPIRITUAL RENEWAL NURTURING YOUR RELATIONAL NATURE AND VISION

Mark 1:35-38; Luke 11:5-13; and Acts 3:1-10

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Therese Martin was the youngest of nine children. Only four of her siblings lived to the age of 18 and her mother died when Therese was 4 years of age. Therese herself lived with tuberculosis dying at the young age of 24. Yet, her brief life reveals that each one of us can make a difference. At the age of 15, Therese chose to live in a convent and became known as 'The Little Flower,' due to her love of flowers. We will return to Therese a bit later.

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We are in a season of spiritual renewal, focusing on the theme, 'LORD OF THE HARVEST.' Jesus saw many people who were like sheep without a shepherd. So, he challenged us to pray for more laborers in the Lord's harvest. So, we pursue Active Faith by nurturing our identity through our relationship with God and actively serving the needs of the world. We are involved in more than a social or political movement or business enterprise. We follow Jesus serving the needs of the world. Our vocation is to be ministers in daily life praying, 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth...'

Over the past two Sundays, I have called you to spiritual renewal in your worship and in bearing God's image in your life. Today, I offer two ideas as we consider spiritual renewal through prayer.

1. THE WORLD NEEDS YOU TO PRAY.

Everywhere you turn, you see increased fear, suspicion and defensiveness. We have added layers of protection and security to our lives. Dialogue has been replaced by dialectic. Pursuit of peace has been eliminated by polarization. The spirits of many people have been locked down. *Prayer is the only key that unlocks the human spirit to God – and then to humanity.*

In this morning's Call to Worship, we read the story of Jesus who is off by himself praying before dawn. Simon Peter and John interrupted him with these words, "Everyone is looking for you." Jesus said, 'okay, let's go meet needs; it's why I'm here.' But, first, Jesus prayed. If Jesus needed to pray, you need to pray. Prayer aligns the human will with the will of God. Prayer sustains your faith. Prayer empowers you for ministry.

While you are in this sanctuary, the needs of this world are knocking on your consciousness. Like a thief in the night, the confusion and anger of this world try to break into your life; but, not merely to steal your peace and disappear. Confusion and anger break-in to stay and control you; to make you feel afraid, cynical and lonely. They make you feel like a stranger in your own skin.

Let me tell you the rest of that story about Therese, ‘The Little Flower.’ While living in the convent, she developed an approach to prayer which she described as ‘deceptively simple.’ In her ‘Little Way’ of prayer, you ask God to guide you to be a servant, welcoming unjust criticism, helping those who are ungrateful and befriending those who annoy you. She called this ‘The Little Way of Jesus’ who was a servant welcoming unjust criticism, helping the ungrateful and befriending those who annoyed him.

In the convent, there was one specific Sister who was rude and conceited; her attitude and behavior irritated everyone. So, when Therese arrived, she chose to befriend that Sister. Therese wrote, *“I set myself to treat her as if I loved her best of all.”* When young Therese passed on, the Sister she had befriended was changed by Therese’s love for her and grieved deeply. What that Sister may not have known was that Therese also prayed twelve times each day.

Jesus did not pray to awaken a slumbering God to the needs of the world Jesus was facing. Yet, Jesus understood what you understand. **Sometimes you must separate yourself from everyone else because the needs of the world need you to be alone with God?** Jesus prayed to nurture his relational nature and vision. Like Jesus, the world needs you to pray so your active service focusing on the needs of the world reflects the character of God. **The world has all kinds of people addressing needs in ways that do not reflect the nature and character of God. And when your service is not formed or shaped by your relationship with God, your service may be socially or economically transactional, but it is not spiritually transformational. The world needs you to pray.**

2. PRAYER CONNECTS YOU TO GOD’S SPIRITUAL POWER.

The Maryknollers are sometimes called the ‘Marines of the Catholic Church.’ They move into challenging situations of conflict to live among indigenous people, learn their language and take on their customs so they can build bridges of peace through understanding. Many Maryknollers have been martyred. During a conversation about prayer, one Maryknoller said, *“Do not pray because there is sin. Pray because there is evil. Pray because evil is prevalent and persistent. Pray because evil makes you think that sin is the problem. But, remember, Jesus taught us to pray ‘deliver us from evil.’”*

Jesus taught that behind all of the structures, systems, injustices, immoralities, prejudices and inconsistencies, there is evil. Fear not; I have not-yet gone off the deep end of the psychological spectrum represented by theological extremism. But, friends, there is more going on this world than human powers. The world needs us to pray and we need to pray to connect with the power of God.

The same Simon Peter and John who interrupted Jesus at prayer made prayer a commitment in their lives. One day, they were on the way to the temple for the hour of prayer and encountered a beggar who had been lame from birth. They stopped their journey to temple prayer offering him the power that was at work in them. Science cannot explain what happened that afternoon. Yet, there was a power beyond human power at work that day. And this Divine Power is at work each and every day. The people around the temple gate were filled with wonder and amazement at what happened to this fellow they had seen for years. I guess so. When transformational change occurs, God is at work.

In one of Jesus' parables, he told about a fellow – let's name him Clifford – going over to his friend's house – Justin we'll say – right after Justin and Mrs. Justin had gotten the youngest of their five children to sleep for the night. Since the family lived in a one-room dwelling, getting five kiddos to sleep was a task. About midnight, just as the room fell silent, Clifford showed up at Justin's door with a light 'tap-tap-tap.' Justin whispers through the door, 'I am sorry that you have an unexpected situation; but if I tiptoe over these children, one of them will awaken – and when one of them wakes up the whole house is awake.' Of course, Justin eventually got up and gave Clifford what he needed.

Here, Jesus teaches against Deism. His story teaches that prayer is linked to action. According to Jesus, God has NOT put the world and its operations in place only to walk away from an interactive relationship with humans. Jesus teaches you to pray using relational words: "*Our Father...give us our daily bread...forgive us...lead us.*" In your prayers, you are connecting with the power of God.

Jesus teaches you to relate with God through prayer with confidence. When you ask, seek and knock, you are not merely presenting a wish-list. Your requests focus on God's missional kingdom where righteousness, justice and peace are experienced and expressed by all. When you pray, you declare that you are partnered with God acknowledging the Kingdom of God is God's vision for all creation and is not currently being carried out everywhere in our world. 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven.' So, when you pray, you are an actively faithful laborer in the harvest of the Lord letting your requests be known to the Lord.

Prayer can be personal; but prayer for the child of God can never be so private that it is selfish. God has answered my prayers; sometimes, 'yes;' sometimes, 'no;' sometimes, 'wait;' and sometimes, God answers my prayers by changing me. One fellow said, "It's amazing how many coincidences start happening when you start praying." The world needs us to pray so we are connected to God's power.

May you experience spiritual renewal through prayer! Ask whether your life reflects the spirit of Jesus. Seek to express the mission of God. Knock on the door of spiritual renewal. Pray that our church will mature in prayer. Pray that more of us will begin each day in prayer. Pray that our children and youth will catch from us a deep commitment to The Living God who shapes us through our prayers to be people of active faith?

Just as everyone was looking for Jesus, people are needing you beyond this sanctuary. When they find you, and they will, may they find you have been with God, in prayer! Amen and AMEN!