

"THE POWER OF PRAYER"

March 12, 1989

TEXT: Mark 11:24 "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer believe that you will receive it and you will."

In this passage which I just read there must be about four hours of sermon material. You will be happy to know that I have no intention of laying them all on you this morning. I will not talk about the fig tree. That must wait till after Easter. Nor will I talk about forgiveness, as important as that subject is. For today I want to talk about prayer. Indescribable, unexplainable, yet indispensable prayer. Nothing is nearer to the very heart of religion --Christian or otherwise. Yet nothing presents the modern mind with greater difficulty. We do not know --we can not know-- what prayer really is --or, for that matter, even what it does. And, yet, we are urged, one might even say compelled, to pray --by scripture, by upbringing, and by that irresistible desire which rises up out of the soul, itself. "Without prayer," writes Thomas Carlyle, "there can be no religion, or only a dumb one."

Most of us would probably agree with that. But we are brought up short when we hear statements like the one I read just a few moments ago? "Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that it will come to pass it will be done for him." What are we to make of that? Whatever those words meant to earlier generations, to many of us they do not mean much today.

Some ignore them altogether --and prayer, too, for that matter. Others, more friendly, point to the words "and does not doubt in his heart" and argue that we just do not have enough faith. Still others call for an allegorical interpretation. They tell us that the "mountain" means some obstacle between us and God. That, when we pray for the "mountain" to be uprooted and cast into the sea, we are merely asking for that obstacle to be eliminated. But such suggestions fall apart in very next verse where Jesus adds, "Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and you will."

"Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and you will." How many of us really believe that? How many even want to? We know only too well that man can not be trusted with such enormous power. And we know too,

that, if we really could have whatever we wanted --just by praying-- it would spell the end of some of our finest human attributes: patience, and courage, compassion and generosity. There would no longer be any need for them. They would simply atrophy and die.

So, many folk today can not take those words very seriously. But let us not throw out the baby with the bath. It may be hard to take such passages literally, but we need not ignore them altogether. Perhaps they are over-stated; poetry often is. But surely they mean something. Especially since there are so many of them. Here are just a few. "When he calls to me, I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honor him. (Psalm 91:15) "Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer: you shall cry, and he shall say, 'Here I am.'" (Isaiah 58:9) "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and hidden things which you have not known." (Jeremiah 33:3) "Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you." (Luke 11:9) "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you." (John 15:7)

If there are that many, and more, all of which say essentially the same thing, then maybe, just maybe, they really do mean something. And, whether or not we believe that prayer can move mountains, whether or not we believe it will get us what we want, just maybe prayer is important. Perhaps it can do something. Something crucial to the life of faith. What do you suppose that something could be?

Well, in the first place, prayer can change our problems. Prayer brings God into the picture. And that makes everything look different. His coming casts our circumstances into a whole new dimension. Robert Luccock writes:

"Have you ever been awakened in the night by someone in your family suddenly being taken sick? Perhaps a child cries out in pain, a pain he does not understand, nor do you. And you are frightened; as the minutes go by the cold grip of terror freezes your heart. You do not know what to do, or indeed, if there is anything to do. And then a trusted doctor comes into the room, a doctor in whom you have every confidence. With no show of fear or dread he sits beside the bed and quietly takes the crisis in his hands. Somehow you are content now that he has come for you feel that he is adequate for whatever need be done. His very coming has altered the face of a dark hour in the night. So it is when the great Physician arrives on any scene of crisis."

Prayer can change our problems. It can make them manageable.

Secondly, prayer can change us. Change us by changing our perception of who we are. It reminds us that we are not self-sufficient, that we are not God. Too often we forget that. And, when we do, we almost always get into trouble. And, before we can get out, we have to re-learn who we are. Like the Psalmist, we need to accept the fact that the Lord is God. "It is He that hath made us, and we are His." And, when we pray, really pray, we are reminded of that. We admit that we are weak and needy and that God is wiser, stronger, greater than we are. That puts life on a new, more realistic plane.

Prayer changes us, too, by bringing us closer to God. Not long ago I saw a television program about some ex-football players. They and their wives were talking about the things they missed most after retirement. And, strangely enough, it was not the money, or the excitement, or the fame. Without exception, they all said it was the fellowship. The close camaraderie they found in working and sacrificing together for a common goal.

We find something very much like that when we work together with God. Perhaps that is why Cecil B. De Mille wrote, "Let the Divine Mind flow through your own mind, and you will be happier. I have found the greatest power in the world in the power of prayer. There is no shadow of doubt in that. I speak from my own experience." I know what he means. I can not explain it, but I have felt it. And so have many of you. Prayer makes a difference in us because, in the words of Mother Teresa, it ". . . enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God's gift of Himself." If it did nothing more than that, it would be miracle enough.

Yet I believe prayer does do more. Much more. I am firmly convinced that, in some utterly inexplicable way, prayer actually changes circumstances. Just how, we can not say. Certainly our prayers do not tell God anything He did not already know. Jesus said, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:8) And, just as certainly, prayer does not convince God to do something He did not want to do. Phillips Brooks hit the nail on the head when he wrote, "Prayer is not conquering God's reluctance but taking hold of God's willingness."

Prayer allows God to do something He wanted to do but could not --or, at least, would not-- without us. Nearly sixteen centuries ago St. Augustine wrote, "Without God we can't; without us, God won't." As awesome as it may seem, it would appear that God waits for our permission and co-operation before certain things can happen.

Praying is like turning on an electric switch. It does not create the current, but it does provide a channel through which that power can flow. Now, I am not an engineer, but I have been in amateur radio for nearly forty years. And I know a little about electricity. I know, for instance, that electric

current will not flow unless there are two poles, one positive and one negative. If there are not two poles, or if the circuit is interrupted, say by an open switch, nothing happens. It is that simple.

And God, in His infinite Love and Compassion, appears to work that way with us. Perhaps because only in that way can you and I become what He is grooming us to be, heirs of the Grace of life. Most of us are not entirely ready for that yet. So God does not burden us with too much "success" in prayer. But the path toward growing in prayer is prayer, itself.

And that brings us back to this morning's scripture. Perhaps those passages are not so excessive after all. Perhaps not even poetic overstatement. Perhaps they are a vision. A promise of what prayer can be --what we can be-- when, through prayer, we have grown enough in prayer to pray indeed.

So let us not worry about what prayer can, or can not, do. And let us not allow our clumsy, halting steps to discourage us. If we had taken that approach toward walking, we would still be crawling around like babies. Prayer is not a thing "asked for." It is a thing to be done. A reaching forth to link oneself to our Source of love and power. Not to get what we want. But to be what we can.

The Japanese take the trees of the forest and turn them into pretty little playthings just by binding the tap-root that permits their growth. Sustained only by surface roots, these potential giants remain but a token of their true nature. And prayer is the tap-root of man. Without it, we can be interesting, decorative, even useful to a point. But, bind the tap-root of prayer, and we shall never be what we could have been. So, if we cannot pray the way we would, let us pray as best we can.