

The Power of Prayer

Acts 4:5-12
April 14, 2024

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

Heartland Presbytery, which is our regional body, had its regularly scheduled meeting and worship service last Tuesday. As a member of the planning team, I offered to staff a Healing Prayer station during the service, which featured several other stations in addition to Healing Prayer. I had asked about having a second pastor staff the prayer station in case we had more people than expected, but nothing got arranged ahead of time.

Sure enough, when it came time to visit the various stations throughout the worship space, several people lined up for Healing Prayer. So, one by one I prayed over the prayer requests of each person. It was going really well; I felt the Holy Spirit guiding and equipping me.

After about six people – maybe 15 or 20 minutes – a worship song was cued and music filled the space. Finishing the prayer I had started, I looked up just as the four or five people still waiting for prayer turned away to join the other worshipers in singing. I did the same, all the while feeling terrible that four or five people had waited for prayer that did not come, at least not from me.

Looking back, I wonder why I didn't invite the first person I prayed over to stay and join me in praying for the others. I mean, not only was he a pastor, but he was that rare kind of Presbyterian pastor who wears a clerical collar, like a priest. He even had a large, Latin cross hanging from a chain around his neck. It would have been perfect.

I was so focused on each person as they came to me for prayer that I just didn't think of it at the time. And that has left me feeling like we, as worship leaders, missed an opportunity to minister more broadly in the spirit of Jesus Christ, the name of Jesus Christ.

In today's New Testament lesson, Peter and John are committed to ministering broadly and boldly in the spirit of Jesus Christ. Even when they get caught up in praying for a crippled man who can't walk, even when they get arrested for proclaiming the glory and power of Jesus, Peter and John use it as an opportunity to go on ministering in his name, saying, "There is salvation in no one else (but Jesus)"

Nothing can stop them from proclaiming the power and glory of Christ. They just won't let themselves get distracted or miss any opportunity that comes their way.

And yet, we get distracted and sidetracked all time when it comes to focusing on our faith, over and above all else, even when that "all else" is good and righteous stuff that we're focused on. I can't help but feel that God sent me a prayer partner at Presbytery to minister more broadly, reach more people, and I missed the opportunity.

Being in ministry is not easy. Being a faithful follower of Christ is not easy, as you know. There's always more that you could be doing than you can possibly get to or manage – or even see – given all of life's obligations and distractions.

And yet, every time we realize that – every time we realize we've missed out on a holy moment - it's an opportunity to use our limitations to proclaim the power and glory of God. I wish I had had the presence of mind to partner with the Rev. Scott White – with his clerical collar and Latin cross – so that all people in line at Presbytery were prayed for. And yet, I'm thankful that Spirit moved me to use that experience here, in this sermon, to proclaim the gospel among you, Christ's faithful followers.

And I wonder, where in your life do you have the opportunity to proclaim the gospel, and maybe you don't see it? Where are you able to offer prayer for another, but don't take the time, or risk the spotlight, or think yourself worthy or capable? And what is it that gets in the way of you pushing past that and putting your faith on the line?

I mean, there was something about the high priests with Peter and John that day that kept them from seeing God at work, right before their eyes. There was something that had them get in the way of what the Lord was doing. And there was something that had Peter and John proclaim the power of prayer, even if it meant putting themselves at risk.

If we look at life through the lens of our faith, if we look for where God is at work in both our successes and our failures, our abundance, and our limitations, then we always have an opportunity to proclaim the power and glory of the Lord.

Take for instance the young boy who was fishing with his dad one day. They put the line into the water and went up to the cabin. After an hour they went back to the river to see if they had caught anything.

Sure enough, there were several fish on the line. The son said, "I knew there would be, Daddy." The father asked, "How did you know?" The boy said, "Because I prayed about it."

So, they baited the hooks again, put out the line, and went back to the cabin for supper. After supper, they went back to the river and once again there were fish on the line. "I knew it!" said the boy. "How did you know it?" asked the father. "I prayed again," said the boy.

A third time, they put the line into the river and went to the cabin. Just before bed, they checked the line and this time there were no fish.

The boy said, "I knew there would be no fish." "How did you know?" asked the father. "Because I didn't pray this time," said the boy. "And why didn't you pray?" asked the Father.

"Because I remembered," said the boy, "we forgot to bait the hooks."

We always have an opportunity to proclaim the power and glory of the Lord when we look for where God is at work, in both our successes and our failures.

When Peter and John were arrested in the midst of doing the Lord's work, when they were hauled before the chief priests and asked, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Peter and John used their arrest to point to where God was at work, even in that.

They saw that in being arrested for healing the lame man they were given the opportunity to proclaim the power and glory of Christ all the more. "... Let it be known to all of you," says Peter, "and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth..."

Here we see that, not only does the lame man stand in good health by the name and power of Christ, but Peter and John are also able to stand - stand tall before their accusers by the name and power of Christ.

Where do you stand when circumstances get in the way of you speaking and acting on behalf of Christ, when the world pushes in on your calling as a follower of Jesus? Do you look for the opportunity to turn things toward Christ, to speak a word of faith? Or do you allow worldly matters to rule your life?

If you think about it, there's never a time or place where your faith is not in play. In all circumstances - good, bad and indifferent - we have the opportunity to see and proclaim the hand of God, even if it's only in retrospect, after we've missed an opportunity to act more faithfully, to align more closely with the Lord.

So, ask yourself, what stories from your life might you tell that would have others see the hand of God at work in this world, in their lives. What missed opportunities have you had, that if you told about them, others would be inspired to go a little deeper in their faith?

We all have an opportunity to speak and act on behalf of the Lord, in all circumstances. This is our Christian calling. This is how the Spirit of the Lord moves and works among us. This is how we ensure that the faith lives on for generations to come, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, who moves and works in the mysteries of life, you have overcome the power of death. With your resurrection power, you work to conquer all that threatens your plan for abundant life.

In Christ's resurrection, we see the beginning of the end of the things we fear most. Even if we do not always sense it now, we trust that the end will come to all that defies your Spirit of grace and mercy.

We pray for an end to hunger and food insecurity, and for the end of violence in families and communities around the world. We hope for a day when no one shall rule in tyranny, when all power shall be exercised according to your love and justice.

Holy Spirit, let us know and proclaim the power of the risen Christ in our lives, as we witness your work to overcome all of your earthly enemies. We pray for an end to cancer and other devastating diseases, and for successful treatment of Scott's brain cancer. We pray for all those dealing with end-of-life struggles; grant them peace and comfort. We pray for those who've suffered injuries and other medical setbacks and health issues.

We pray all this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.