

June 23, 2013
Church Planting

Will You Pray with Me?
Acts 4:23-31

Opening words: You know the story. Jesus was executed on a Friday. Everyone thought it was over. However, everyone was wrong. It was just beginning. On Sunday morning a few women showed up at his tomb to pay their final respects. They made a discovery that changed the world. Jesus was alive! For forty days he walked the face of this world in his resurrected state. During that sacred time period, he did two things. First, he proved his was a bodily resurrection. In other words, he wasn't a ghost. Second, he taught about the Kingdom of God. As he ascended into heaven, Jesus entrusted the ministry to the disciples. On their own, the task of evangelizing the world seemed impossible, but when the Holy Spirit arrived, everything seemed possible. The church was created and the divine helper was changing lives. For example, on a single day 3,000 people claimed the name of Jesus and were saved. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings, the fellowship and to worship. The apostles were changing too. They were learning how to trust the Holy Spirit. With the help of the Holy Spirit, Peter healed a man who had been crippled from birth. For this act of kindness, Peter and John were arrested and interrogated by the Sanhedrin. That leads us to today.

We are near the end of the fourth chapter of Acts. John and Peter were released with the orders to never mention the name of Jesus again. That was impossible. The church has always wanted to talk about Jesus. When they arrived home, they are greeted by the fellow believers, who wanted to hear the news. They celebrated their safe return by praying. We are going to look at that prayer today. I have called this sermon series on *Acts Church Planting*. I have called this message *Will You Pray with Me?* May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Acts 4:23-31.

Acts 4:23-31 ²³ On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵ You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

"Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
²⁶ The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one.'

²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸

They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

³¹ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Saint Francis of Assisi once uttered this prayer:

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive it; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

And all of God’s people said, **“Amen!”**

Years ago, I served three churches in Belmont County, Ohio. I was proud to serve the United Methodist congregations in Morristown, Loydsville and Bannock. The largest of the three churches had about sixty in worship. My three churches were teamed with two other United Methodist congregations in the area, Belmont and Bethesda. Together, we formed the West Belmont Cooperative Parish. Every Monday morning the pastors of those churches would meet. The pastor of the Belmont church was a guy by the name of Lew Kilzer. He was sort of an odd fellow but I liked him. He wore an un-groomed beard and rumpled shirt. His cloudy glasses were always sliding down his nose. I didn’t see him at Annual Conference this week because he left the ministry years ago. He was more interested in computers than he was people. One day he turned on his computer and said, “I want to show you something.” He hit a few buttons and his computer came to life. He showed us a list of prayer requests. He flashed his yellow smile toward us and said, “My church is compiling a list of our prayer requests. We are going to prove to the world that prayer does work.” I thought that was an odd thing to do, so I said with a smile, “How many answered prayers do you need to prove prayer does work?” He ignored my cynical comment and pointed to the list. There were all kind of things on it:

1. Vern was facing knee surgery
2. Doris’ children were traveling up from Charlotte
3. Jennifer was taking a big exam in school
4. Dorothy was trying a new hair color and prayed she would like it
5. Kelly wanted a date with someone named Steve
6. Rain for the crops
7. Lois was worried about a new recipe

Wanting to impress us with his computer, he printed the list out and gave each one of us a copy. When I got home I looked the list. The more I looked at the list, the more critical I grew. Everything on that list was about them, their needs and their desires.

I hate to say it. Their prayer requests were extremely narrow and selfish. Listen to what I am about to say. There is more to prayer than our needs and desires. Prayer is really about others. Prayer is really about God. I have to ask you this question. What do our prayer requests say about us? What do our prayer requests say about our spiritual maturity? When was the last time you prayed about some secondary issue in your life? When was the last time you prayed for God's plan for our world?

Today, I want to challenge you. I want you to look beyond yourself. I want you to look at the big picture. I want you to look at things that are eternal. When you pray I want you to remember the **sovereignty of God**. When you pray I want you to remember the **supremacy of Christ**. When you pray I want you to remember the **sanctity of the church**. Those are the three things the early church prayed for in the scripture lesson. They knew what we have forgotten. Prayer is not about us; Prayer is about God. If you can remember those three things, the sovereignty of God, the supremacy of Christ and the sanctity of the church, then your prayer life will be revolutionized. If you are ready to look at those three things with me, say, "**Amen!**"

The Sovereignty of God

One of the most beloved and known story in the Bible is the story of Jonah. We think of it as a children's story. However, it is really a story for adults. You know the story as well as I. Jonah was a prophet. He was the reluctant prophet. God tells him to go to Nineveh because they need to repent. The problem is Jonah does not want to go. This is the question you must answer to understand the book. Why doesn't Jonah want to go to Nineveh? The reason is the people of Nineveh are Gentiles and Jonah is a Jew. He only wants God to love people who are just like him. Do you see where I am going? Every day we play the part of Jonah. We only want to love people who are just like us. When was the last time you prayed for someone who wasn't just like you?

When you pray, I challenge you to remember the sovereignty of God. When God looks at the world, he doesn't see political boundaries or different philosophies of living. God is not a racial profiler. God does not see Americans and non-Americans. God has never uttered the phrase, "Charity begins at home." That is such an unchristian phrase. God only sees human need and suffering. Look at verses 24b-26. It says, "*When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one."*" Is there a Jonah in the house? Is there anyone here who only wants to love people who are just like us? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**" I challenge you to remember the sovereignty of God. I challenge you to remember the supremacy of Christ.

The Supremacy of Christ

I have shared these words with you in the past:

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator.
If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist.
If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist.
If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer.
But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.

The second thing you should never forget when you pray is the supremacy of Christ. I know this sounds politically incorrect, but I am going to say it. Those other religious leaders were fine people, but none of them could stand next to Christ. Jesus is the greatest life that ever lived. He is the bridge between God and mankind. He is your only hope of salvation. According to God, the only thing that matters is Jesus. What does Philippians 2:8-11 say?

**He humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross.
Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor
and gave him the name above all other names,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.**

In other words, nothing else really matters but Jesus in the life of the church. Verses 27-28 says, *"Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."* If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** I challenge you to remember the sovereignty of God. I challenge you to remember the supremacy of Christ. I challenge you to remember the sanctity of the church.

The Sanctity of the Church

In 1949, the Chinese communist government kicked out all of the foreign missionaries in their country. That action signaled the beginning of a new round of Christian persecution. For decades it was nearly impossible to get news out of China about the church. Everyone was asking the question, "What's happening in China?" The only thing the church could do was pray. We expected the worst. Then we found out what was happening - revival! In 1949, there were 1.8 million believers in China. By the year 2000 there were 26 million (not including the estimated 45 million of the underground house churches). Yes, there was terrible persecution, but there was also revival! Through the eyes of God the only thing that matters is that Jesus is glorified. What is the most important thing to you?

When you pray, I challenge you to remember the sanctity of the church. I am not talking about the human organization we call the church. I am talking about that organization God calls the church, those individuals who are glorifying the name of Jesus. Do you think God considers us part of the church? Verses 29-31 says, *"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."* After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

During this past week I attended Annual Conference in Lakeside. You know how I feel about Annual Conference. I was not disappointed. Every minute was special. The highlight for me came on Tuesday night. Kathryn and I visited with an old friend, Carol Bartlett. Kathryn has known her for years. As a matter of fact, Carol was Kathryn's Sunday School teacher during her High School years. Years later, she babysat our daughter, Anna, in her home. As we visited, Kathryn looked at her and said, "Mrs. Bartlett, I have to tell you something. Without you I never would have gone into the ministry." Carol responded with moist eyes. She said, "Every time I hear about your ministry in Russia, I am so proud I know you. I have to tell you something. I'm not in a situation to financially support your ministry. I'm sorry." Kathryn said, "I don't send you those reports because I want your money. I send you those reports because I want something more valuable. I want your prayers." If Mrs. Bartlett knows anything, she knows how to pray.

Do you know how to pray? Never forget three things when you pray. Never forget about the **sovereignty of God**. What is more important to you, God's agenda or your agenda? Never forget about the **supremacy of Christ**. He was the greatest person that ever lived. Never forget about the **sanctity of the church**. The true church is still proclaiming the Good News of Jesus. John Wesley once said, *"Prayer is where the action is."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**