

July 10, 2016

Church Planting
In the Name of Jesus
Acts 16:16-18

Opening words: Before I read this morning's scripture lesson to you, let me read two quotes; both are from the great reformer, Martin Luther. The first is, "*To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.*" The second is, "*Prayer is a strong wall and the fortress of the church; it is a Godly Christian weapon.*" At the very heart of our faith is prayer. How often do you pray? Do the people in your life consider you a person of prayer? This is the most important question. Do you understand prayer? If you are uncomfortable with your last answer, then this message is for you.

Once again we are in the sixteenth chapter of Acts. That chapter contains some of Paul's second missionary journey. If you were with me two weeks ago, then you may remember the previous story, the conversion of Lydia. Her conversion is a well-known story. This week's story, the healing of the fortune teller, is not as well known. I will be completely honest with you. This is the first time I have preached on this text. I enjoyed wrestling with these sacred words. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 16:16-18. This is sermon number thirty-six in this sermon series on the Book of Acts, *Church Planting*. Let me call this message *In the Name of Jesus*.

Acts 16:16-18 Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling.¹⁷ She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."¹⁸ She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

Even non-Christians appreciate prayer. For example, Mahatma Gandhi once said, "*Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.*" If you find some truth in that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

Did you know, according to the Yellow Pages, there are forty fortune tellers in the Youngstown area? The closest one is Psychic Readings by Amelia in Canfield on Hillside Road. Has anyone here ever gone there? Has anyone here ever gone to a psychic reader or fortune teller? I hope not, because there is nothing fun about them. There is a dark side to that old practice. I do not doubt their ability to see into the future. I worry about the source of that power. Let me say this clearly. The source of that power is rooted in the occult. In other words, the ability to read into the future comes from

Satan, himself. Fortune telling has been with us a long time. It is even found in the scripture lesson for today.

We are in the sixteenth chapter of Acts. Paul, Silas and Timothy are looking for a place to pray. That should be easy, but it is really quite hard. According to the text, their solitude is broken by a female slave who has the ability to read the future. Her ability to do so has made her master a great deal of money. Our generation has disguised fortune telling as entertainment; her generation saw it as satanic. The meeting of Paul and the fortune teller is not a brief encounter. She stalks Paul and his small group for an unknown amount of time. I am not exactly sure what happened, but something happened. It broke the camel's back. With his patience completely gone, Paul looked at the woman and called on the name of Jesus. The demon is extracted and the story ends with the woman being liberated. Time and time again, the Bible tells us that calling on the name of Jesus reveals God's authority. Have you ever called on the name of Jesus in your time of greatest need?

Years ago, I served three United Methodist congregations in the Saint Clairsville area; Morristown, Lloydsville and Bannock. The total attendance at all three was approximately eighty. I preached at all three every week. I was at Morristown at 9:00. Lloydsville at 10:00 and Bannock at 11:00. The best thing about those churches were the people. That were good to me and taught me a great deal about pastoral care.

I will never forget the day a woman called me and said, "Russ, I need your help." She went on to tell me her neighbor's son was killed in a traffic accident. He was out celebrating his twenty-first birthday and drank too much. When the highway patrol cut his lifeless body out of the car, they found a half emptied case of beer and countless empty beer cans. The young man never had a chance. I found out later his father had bought him the case of beer to help him celebrate. I spent hours with the grieving mother over the next few days. With red rimmed eyes she asked me two questions that I will never forget. "Was God punishing my son for some past sin?" No, God did not make your son drink and drive. No one likes the consequences of sin. "Why didn't God hear my prayer and save his life?" It was clear to me that she was ignorant about prayer.

Do you know of anyone who is ignorant about prayer? You must know someone who prayed with a sincere heart for their greatest desire, only to be disappointed. They prayed for a terminal brother, sister or child only to have them die. They prayed for a baby, but the baby never came. The cradle still sits in the corner collecting dust. They prayed for a perfect job, but perfection never came. They are still wearing a name tag or a hair net. The problem was not the sincerity of their words. The problem was not their lack of faith. The problem was not their unholy lifestyle. The problem was that they were ignorant about prayer. Prayer is not about getting what you want. Prayer is not just saying the right words. Prayer is your spirit yearning to be with God. When you

pray in the name of Jesus, three things happen. You need to remember these three things because they will revolutionize your prayer life.

Admitting

First, when you pray in the name of Jesus you are admitting your limitations. Abraham Lincoln once said, *"I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day."* How many times has life driven you to your knees? God always has our attention when life is hard. I witness that daily.

Did you know the countries with the fastest growing conversion rates to Christianity are all found in Africa and Asia? Not one of those countries on the list is found in western Europe or North America. There are several reasons for this, but one stands out. The areas of the world where Christianity is declining are the same areas that have the highest standard of living. In other words, those areas have the most money. God has a hard time getting our attention because we can take care of ourselves. That is why more church mortgages in America were paid off during the Great Depression than any other decade in the twentieth century. How many people don't pray because they don't think they need God? They can take care of themselves. When we pray in the name of Jesus, we are admitting our limitations. If you can agree with that statement, say, **"Amen!"**

Identifying

During the 1800s, Reverend E.P. Scott was a missionary in India. Against the advice of his peers, he decided to travel to a remote tribe to share the Gospel. Several days into his journey, he was confronted by a group of warriors. They took their spears and pointed them into his chest. He responded by pulling out his violin, closed his eyes and started singing. What did he sing? He sang *All Hail the Power of Jesus Name*. The warriors didn't know what to do so they lowered their spears. In time, the warriors began to cry. Scott was saved and spent the rest of his life teaching that tribe about Jesus. There is something about that name, Jesus!

When you pray in the name of Jesus you are identifying Jesus as your Lord and Savior. You are not praying in the name of Mohammed or Buddha. You are not calling on the name of your country or your favorite sports franchise. You are calling on the name of Jesus. In the scripture lesson Paul commanded the spirit to come out in the name of Jesus. That is important because it shows Jesus' authority over the spirit. This is not the only place. Jesus had authority over a variety of things in the Bible. When you pray in the name of Jesus, you are telling the world that you belong to him. If you agree with that statement, say, **"Amen!"**

Submitting

One of the great stories in the Bible is the Garden of Gethsemane. You know the scene. The end is near. After three years of teaching and healing, Jesus is staring at the cross.

It was Holy Week and so much had already happened. Jesus had already entered Jerusalem on that humble animal. Jesus had already cursed the fig tree and taught at the temple. Jesus had already been anointed and shared that last Seder with the disciples. Judas Iscariot had already agreed to betray him. There was nothing left for Jesus to do but wait. Jesus was waiting to be arrested. As he waits, he goes to the garden to pray. He knows of the coming ugliness. He struggles as he prays. In Luke 22:42 Jesus prays, *Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will but your will be done.* Those are powerful words. Jesus does what we are unable to do - submit to God's will.

When you pray in the name of Jesus, you are submitting to his will. Do you remember your old Sunday school teaching? God hears and answers all prayers. Sometimes, God answers, "Yes." That is what happened in the scripture lesson. The slave was healed. Sometimes, God answers, "No." Paul was never healed from the thorn in his side. Sometimes, God answers, "Later." There are many examples of that in our world. Sometimes, God answers, "Are you crazy?" Praying to win the lottery isn't going to help. We always want the answer to be yes, but it doesn't always happen. What really matters is, are you submitting to God's will? That is hard for people. When you pray in the name of Jesus you are submitting to God's will. If you will admit that is a hard one to swallow, say, **"Amen!"**

How many of you know the name Ted Turner? When cable television exploded onto the American scene, Atlanta-based Ted Turner was one of the leaders. One of his first stations was CNN, the Cable News Network. It was the first to carry news 24/7. I always remember channel nine, WTBS. They carried all the Atlanta Braves baseball games in the days of Bob Horner. Today, Ted Turner is 77 years old and is worth an estimated \$2.2 billion. He has made many wonderful business decisions, but his spiritual life is completely bankrupt. His story is sad. He was raised in a Christian home and as a youth he dreamed of going into the mission field. That all changed during the illness and death of his sister. That experience in life changed him. He became disenchanted with Christianity. He said, "I prayed for my sister but she died anyway." Discouraged, he walked away and never looked back.

Do you have any Ted Turners in your life? I don't mean billionaires, I mean people who have become disenchanted with the faith. They are not ignorant about life. However, they are ignorant about prayer. Prayer is not a magic wand to get what you want. Prayer is so much more. Prayer is an admission. We just don't have all the resources we need to solve all of our problems. Prayer is an identification. We are saying Jesus was the greatest life that ever lived. Prayer is about submitting. You must surrender to God's will and accept the fact that God knows best. Do you remember the words of the great reformer, Martin Luther? *"To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."*

Will you pray with me?

