

First Presbyterian Church
Acts 4:23-31, “Prepared in Worship: Prayer & Intercession”
August 6th, 2017 by Pastor Matt Johnson

I’m so glad to be here with you in worship today.

We’ve spent the summer looking at
various elements of the periodic table. [Hold up]

I’m sorry, I meant reading various mortgage amortization charts. [Hold up]

No, that’s not right. Various perspectives on tax code reform?

Ah, here it is – various elements of *worship* in the book Pedagogy of Praise.

Now, I’m a pastor, but I’m not so disconnected from life outside the church
that I don’t realize how insanely boring this sounds.

A whole summer of just looking at different aspects of worship?

Uh, go for it. Sounds...very Christian.

If you feel that way, I understand.

But I also hope you’ve realized that the point has not been to
recite dry and pedantic principles of worship
but rather to see:

A) How what we do every week comes from biblical examples
and instruction, and

B) How what we do every week prepares us and equips us for life
in a world that often seeks to press us into its own mold.

You see, in a world that is full of fracturing and divisiveness,
we instead gather together & pass the peace of Christ,
recognizing the reconciliation we have through him.

That was week 1.

In a world that presses us toward complaint, dissatisfaction, critique,
and a desire for more, we instead offer up our praise & thanks
for who God is and what God has done for us.

That was week 2.

In a world committed to always putting your best foot forward,
we instead are brutally honest about our need for
repentance & confession, asking the light of God to shine
bright on who we really are.
That was week 3.

In a world that always seeks what is new and innovative,
we instead seek the wisdom of those who have gone before us
by sharing in the church's creeds and confessions
based in the witness of Scripture.
That was week 4.

And today, in a world where we are told you have to make it
on your own without help from others and be a rugged individualist,
we instead look to God for help, action, healing,
and deliverance through our prayer & intercession.

Jeffrey Greenman, in *Pedagogy of Praise*,
has this to say about prayer's impact:
"Prayer aligns our desires with God's heart...If our character
is to become like Christ, and our actions are to reflect
the way of life modeled by Christ, then our desires
need to become more and more like Christ's desires.
Nothing does that as thoroughly as praying..." (p. 62)

Regardless of our religious beliefs
or our level of personal discipline,
we are instinctually praying people.
Prayer is central to who we are as beings made in God's image.

I really appreciate this insight,
because it takes all the guilt out of prayer.
Praying is not something I have to work myself up for,
but a built in mechanism that I enter into naturally.
Praying is part of my humanity, part of your humanity,
part of your neighbor's humanity.

Our corporate prayer takes this basic instinct,
and focuses it on a more particular object: The Triune God of grace.

An example of what can happen when God's people gather and focus their hearts, minds, and bodies on connecting with their Creator is found in our passage today, Acts 4:23-31.

1) To begin with in verse 24, they acknowledge that God is sovereign.

The word sovereign means completely in control.

And it's only because God is sovereign, in control, that we pray at all.

If God is not able to act, then we'd do just as well to make "Dear diary" entries as to pray to an impotent God.

2) The whole prayer comes out of the Old Testament.

Exodus 20 verse 11 reads, "**You made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.**"

It's repeated verbatim in Acts 4 verse 25.

This reference has to do God's sovereignty over all creation, but the phrase actually comes from

the fourth commandment to honor the Sabbath.

And the Sabbath is the day of the week that we rest

not just so that we get our strength back

but also in acknowledgement that God's activity is foundational to our activity.

I think that plays into what we see happen in this prayer.

But that's only the first Old Testament reference.

In verses 25 and 26 these believers in prayer explicitly refer to Psalm 2

which New Testament writers frequently use to define Jesus' identity and calling.

This is a Psalm that just trashes the arrogance of superpower nations and all their plans in light of their insignificance to God's anointed one.

And clearly in verse 27 the church saw Herod and Pilate as representing the nations who raged against Jesus.

In this way, they are emphasizing God's priorities and purposes that go beyond their present situation, but which are also represented in their present situation.

Along these lines, Greenman asks us to consider:

“Do our prayers reflect the desire to align ourselves
with God’s priorities—his name, his kingdom, his will?
Do our prayers seek above all else for God’s honour
and reputation to be triumphant, everywhere,
on earth as in heaven?

Do we pray for people to be active agents of the kingdom,
dependent upon the Lord fully in every area of life,
living out God’s priorities?” (p. 64)

These are excellent questions for us to consider for our
prayers together on Sunday morning any time of the week.

**3) In verse 29, we see that the persecution of apostles
corresponds to the persecution of Jesus.**

The threats of the nations who crucified Jesus
have now turned against Jesus’ followers.

The church is carrying on the ministry of Jesus
through the Holy Spirit’s presence,
so it is unsurprising that they face
the same opposition that Jesus faced.

4) Therefore, empower us and perform miracles.

The mission of the church emerges out of the basic conflict
the believers have with society at large.

They look to God to empower them,
and in this case the results come immediately:

The place where they are meeting is shaken,
they are filled with the Holy Spirit
(which obviously can happen multiple times)
and they are empowered to speak with boldness.

So the mission of God has its source in Jesus’
pouring out of the person of the Holy Spirit,
and it flows from prayer together before God
into the actions and speech of God’s people.

What happens between those two things—being with God
and taking action—is that our own spiritual DNA
is transformed by the Holy Spirit so that we are empowered
for whatever it is God leads us to.

We are first indwelt by the Spirit of God
who renews and regenerates our spiritual DNA
before we bear the fruit of that Spirit in our life.
Just like in biology, it can't happen the other way around.

Another insight from Jeffrey Greenman on this topic:
“Our moral formation involves seeing others as through God’s eyes of
love. This means setting aside our own self-focus, eschewing our self-
satisfaction, and reaching beyond our indifference. A congregation’s
intercessions are a potent force for reshaping our desires, even as
they bring others into God’s presence. Again, we are praying for *them*,
but the by-product of our intercessions is God’s formation of *us* in the
process.” (p. 64)

The flow of God’s mission then, concerns our internal transformation
so that we are empowered
to join in God’s missional activity in the world.

That transformation and empowerment happens through prayer.

Luke tells the story of Acts in such a way that it is made clear
that the central calling of the first followers of Christ
was to be connected to the Holy Spirit through prayer.
Prayer pertains to the essence of who we are.
It connects us with the center of our being,
and with the Spirit of God who dwells in us.
Prayer is communing with God and being transformed, and renewed,
in our inmost being.

So what are the implications for us at First Presbyterian?
If we desire to join in the mission of God,
we must first engage in prayer that asks God
to transform and empower us for that activity.

This means that our worship practices greatly impact our practical efforts.

Several years ago, I spoke with someone about this in Minnesota.

Her name was Bethel Weimer – one of the deeply faithful pillars of the church, but she was getting older.

I was new at the congregation – new at being a pastor, period – but I had been tasked with the work of congregational redevelopment.

Bethel asked me how things were going, and I did my best to outline the efforts at small groups, and worship renewal, and connecting with the neighborhood.

In response she said,

“Oh, it’s good that they’re planning and coming up with new ideas, but I hope that they’re *praying* enough.

“It’s been my experience that I must pray first, and then begin making my plans.

It’s amazing how the Lord leads if we ask him to— he will not force himself on us.

But trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”

Do you think we would do well to take Bethel’s wisdom to heart?

It is easy for us to get so caught up in the “doing” of things that we forget about the “being” with God that keeps us in the center of God’s mission.

Our participation in the mission of God is entirely dependent on abiding in the presence of God, and on God’s empowerment of us in ministry.

When we trust in the Lord with all our hearts in this way, then we leave behind the anxiety of “producing results,” because that’s entirely in the hands of the Holy Spirit.

Shall we pray?