

“The Door of Prayer”

I Timothy 2:1-8

Dr. J. Howard Olds

March 7, 2004

During my seminary days, I pastored two small churches near Bardstown, Kentucky. One of those churches had Sunday night services. Since it has always been a challenge for me to produce one sermon a week worth hearing, the thought of two sermons a Sunday seemed overwhelming. So we had a lot of hymn sings for Sunday night service. At a hymn sing the people present call out their favorite tunes and everybody sort of sings along. Mrs. Stora Barlow was a public school teacher in that congregation. Every time I asked for congregational favorites, Mrs. Stora would call 177. Hymn 177 in the old Cokesbury Hymnal is entitled “Others”. Its first stanza goes something like this:

Lord, help me live from day to day
In such a self-forgetful way
That even when I kneel to pray
My prayer shall be for others.

Praying for others. That is what I would like to talk about today. Paul says to his young friend Timothy; *“The first thing I want you to do is to pray.”* The first thing I want you to do in your responsibility for our congregation is to pray.

TO PRAY IS TO CARE FOR OTHERS

Do you ever watch the evening news with bombings in Iraq, rebellions in Haiti, with rapes and murders close to home and wonder what you can do? Do you ever watch friends or family stressed out over some life situation or suffering from some disease and feel inadequate to help? Such concerns of life are a call to prayer. Richard Foster says, “If we truly love people we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer.”

In the gospels, there is a tender story of a father who brings his epileptic son to Jesus for healing. The kid has suffered with the disease all his life. The disciples have tried to heal the boy and failed. The father is not very optimistic that Jesus can help. Nevertheless, he says “if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” The prayer is more meek than mighty, more timid than towering. It contains no pretense, no boasting, not even much belief. But Jesus responds and immediately heals the boy. The power of prayer is in the one who hears it, not the one who says it.

We pray not because we have the right formulas or faith strong enough to move mountains. We pray because we are needy and helpless and lonely and have nowhere to go but to the Lord.

A November survey in Newsweek Magazine tells us that 75% of Americans pray at least once a week. Seventy percent pray often for the health of a family member; 52% pray regularly for world peace. Eighty-four percent of Americans think that praying for the sick improves their chances of recovery and more and more patients are asking their doctors for prayer.

We pray for others because it's often hard to pray for ourselves. Grief and disease attack both body and soul. When you are down in the valley, prayer becomes difficult. The soul becomes numb. As I struggled in the hospital last November, I was comforted by the thought of thousands holding me up in prayer. At one of my lowest moments, I asked the Lord to remind me that I was not alone. The next morning there appeared at my window a tiny sparrow. It came back the next day and the next. Slowly the scriptures came to me. *"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Do not be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows."* God sent a tiny bird in answer to your prayers. Paul said to pray every way you know how, for everyone you know. To pray is to care.

TO PRAY IS TO COOPERATE WITH CHRIST

Praying for others is called *intercession*. To intercede is to mediate on behalf of another. It is to represent another in the hour of need. It is to stand in the gap in the time of need and the moment of despair.

Christ is our ultimate Intercessor. He is the Priest acting on our behalf. He is the living bridge between humanity and God. Because Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, he is our Mediator. This is why we pray in Jesus' name. We cannot cross the breach between God and us. But Jesus is God come to our side. He is united forever to our humanity, so we can speak to him and be heard, uniting us with his divinity. It is God made present in the hour of trouble.

In the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, a 26-year-old Briton by the name of Derek Redmond was favored to win the race. Halfway into his semifinal heat a torn hamstring sent fiery pain through his right leg, causing him to crumple to the track. As the medics came to his rescue, Derek scrambled to his feet hopping, pushing, in a crazed attempt to finish the race. That is when a big man pushed through the crowd toward the track. He wore a t-shirt with the question "Have you hugged your kid today?" He wore a cap that said, "Just do it!" The man was Jim Redmond, Derek's dad. When he got to his son he said, "Derek, you don't have to do this." Derek replied, "Yes I do." That is when big Jim put his arm around Derek and said, "Then we'll do it together." That's exactly what they did.

To pray is to bring our heavenly Father out of the stands into the midst of human need. It is leaning on Him when we are not strong. Let Him be your friend. He will help you carry on.

It is God's desire to bring individuals and families into saving faith. It is God's desire to bring people off addiction to drugs, sex, money, status. It is God's desire

to deliver people from racism, sexism, nationalism, and consumerism. It is God's desire to bring whole communities into gospel fidelity. It is God's desire that we keep the faith and finish the race. To pray is not to convince God of our will but find the strength to do his will. It is not overcoming God's reluctance but laying hold to God's highest willingness. To pray; is to cooperate with Christ.

TO PRAY IS TO COMPLETELY SURRENDER

Verse 8: *"I want people everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing."* Henri Nouwen says we come to God with tightly clenched fists. So prayer at first is painful because we discover we do not want to let go of the things that hold us and bind us.

We want to box with God over what is. If you are Almighty why do you seem so feeble? If You will our good, why is there so much bad? If You came to save the world, how come it isn't saved yet? Like Job, we reduce God to our perceptions then curse God for being impotent. It is not always easy to believe. Often we pray "God help our unbelief." Pain and suffering continue to be problems near and far. Questions leave us with clenched fists.

We cling to our hurts. We still haven't gotten over the girl that rejected us or parents who ignored us. We are still jealous of the colleague who got promoted over us; disappointed that we didn't receive a letter; angry that we were ignored. Oh yes, we've learned to live with it. It is pushed back into the recesses of our heart. But there is something about prayer that opens the soul and makes you conscious of the pain that is inside. So, suddenly we are faced with these hurts of our lives and to pray is to face the hurt, the jealousy and the disappointment. We come to God with clenched fists when he invites us to come with open hands.

We have treasures we do not want to part with. You know how it is. You have to get a grip on what is yours and hold your own against those who would take it from you. We make excuses. "That's just how it is with me," and we say it as if we have given up on the belief that there may be plenty for everyone. So here we stand, with balled-up fists trying to protect what time will ultimately take away.

To pray is to open our hands. It is opening our hands to God's promises. We are not alone. We live in God's world. *He will not leave us nor forsake us. When you pass through the waters, he will be with you. The rivers will not sweep over you. He is the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge God and he will direct your paths.*

We need to open our hands to our own weaknesses. A boy prayed: Dear God, please help me be a good boy and if at first you don't succeed, try, try again. A man prayed: please make me the kind of person my dog thinks I am. Open our hands to be led. Prayer is not a magic means by which we control God but a humble means by which God can release his power and purposes through us.

Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand. I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm through the night, lead me on to the light. Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

So let us pray. Let us be a church that really prays, that takes a request for prayer seriously. Let us pray for one another. Let us pray for ourselves. Let us pray that God's kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.