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THE POWER OF PRAYER: CHRIST IN US

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We are in our series of a year-long approach to looking at five praxis or practices, five experiments in the spiritual life. They are: to pray for the entire world, read the entire Bible, add to the community, invest in the kingdom and to be sent to the nations. Today we are in the beginning of praying for the world. We will be talking about the context of prayer in just a moment.

Our Old Testament lesson is from the book of Numbers 20: 2-13 . Now I want to be honest with you, like Mark Twain said, "It's not the parts of the Bible that I don't understand that trouble me, it is the parts that I do." That is really true. Occasionally I come across a passage that I don't understand and it troubles me in that way, and this is one of those today. It troubles me, and here's the reason why. We are told in the book of Numbers that what happens is the reason that Moses doesn't get to go into the Promised Land. I think that Moses got a bum deal and I am grateful that Jesus became the ultimate savior who brought salvation to all. But, I am also troubled

because it is hard to grasp what is going on in this passage, so pay particular attention when you hear it. Pay particular attention to what God tells Moses to do in detail, and pay particular attention to what Moses does. It is very subtle, but huge.

Numbers 20:2-13

Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron. The people quarrelled with Moses and said, 'Would that we had died when our kindred died before the LORD! Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink.' Then Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting; they fell on their faces, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them. The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.

So Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he had commanded him. Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.' These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarrelled with the LORD, and by which he showed his holiness.

In the New Testament, we are right where we left off last week in the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of John, beginning with the twenty-fourth verse. Now Jesus says, in this farewell discourse

offering teaching, words of encouragement to his disciples on that night on which he is to be betrayed. He closes with a prayer. It is likely that the disciples would have been gathered around; he wouldn't have been off in an isolated place. They would have been able to listen. That prayer was three-fold. It begins with prayer for himself, that God would strengthen him as he is about to endure what he is to endure that night and the next day, that God would be with His disciples and the third part of that prayer is that God would be with those whom God is calling His disciples to lead. He closes this powerful prayer with these words.

John 17: 24-26

Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'

I had an interesting experience this week. I had been here at the office all day and late in the afternoon I was on my way to a meeting. I went outside to the parking lot to get in the car. By now the preschool is pretty much emptied out and there weren't very many cars in the lot, but I couldn't find my car. I looked for my car and go out my key to use the panic thing, when the thought comes to me..."someone stole my car."

Then I started this thing that is kind of like a prayer but it's really not a prayer, but you do use the word God a lot. "Oh, God! Oh God! God! Why would someone steal my car? I'm going to be late for this meeting. I hope they at least clean the trunk out if they did steal it!" So I'm out there ten, fifteen minutes when in the midst of it I remember I parked my car in the other parking lot this morning. I then go get in my car drive off and I'm a little late for the meeting but

it all worked out.

Now here is the deep theological reason that I'm sharing this story: it is that four people on the staff saw that and I know they're going to tell you, so I want to tell you first. The things I forget (are many)! Sometimes I can't remember my ...name--when I'm tired. And these are the things I like to call forced humility. There are things that come to me in my life that just embarrass me. They embarrass me in a public setting enough that I just can't cover it because people see it. They know it, and therefore it is a way for me to be given this sort of forced humility.

Now the reason I say that is because, for all of us, human nature can take over a lot of my life. It does that for me, probably more so than for most. What I have found in my own life is that what is at the core of almost all the sin of my life is that I simply begin to think, "It's about me." I start to think, "I've got something really great to do. I want to bring an end to this issue. I want to solve this thing. It's a worthy thing, a devout cause, and I want to be devoted to it." I want to be so devoted to this thing, this worthy cause, that I begin to believe that it would be really great if God partnered with me in it. This is the core of Jim, this is the core of the sin of my life, that I can have God partner with me. I know it's a worthy thing; God is going to be happy about it. God's people are going to be happy about it, so I'll partner with God or God will partner with me.

Ten or fifteen years ago there was this popular thing, these bumper stickers that read, "God is my Co-pilot". Someone shared with me a thought on that. He said, "If God is your co-pilot, you are in the wrong seat. I thought, "Wow!" But in my life, I so start to think that it is about me. That this is a worthy cause, I'm gifted, I'm talented, and I put myself in the wrong seat when I see myself trying to partner with God. It then brings in this whole issue of life.

There is so much talk about Tim Tebow right now. He's not noted to be the greatest professional quarterback, but they've been winning. And yet the reaction to him has been tempered or enhanced by the

understanding of his faith and the way he goes about expressing that. I don't want to make any commentary about whether that is legitimate or not, that is not the point. The point is that most of us are kind of jaded with people that would get up at awards ceremonies and would say, "I want to begin by saying I want to give God all the glory," and then they go on with the rest of the speech that says, "Yes, but I really deserve this, I really was good. Wow! Isn't it cool that God gave me these gifts!" We start to let this identify most of our life. This is my sin. It might relate to you as well.

I have been doing lot of reading from a Russian social philosopher named Pitirim Sorokin. Sorokin looks at society, at cultures. I think you can apply this to organizations as well. He says that there are three stages in every culture. The first is the ideational stage. The ideational stage is when a society is formed, a culture begins and there is a spiritual idea, something that we aspire to spiritually. Once that idea begins to take root, you get to the next stage which is the idealistic stage. The idealistic stage is when the spiritual understanding and the spiritual drive comes and meets the material, so things begin to happen. We start to say that it is not just that I desire that all men are created free, but that we start to live that out in such a way that that means that all men of color are created free and all men and women are created free. And so we start to live into this idealistic stage where the spiritual understanding then shapes the material understanding.

The third stage is what's known as the sensate stage where it's all about the material aspects. We have lost the spiritual understanding and we just live into the material, so you live in a culture or an organization that is bound by law. We have all seen this in organizations in our life. I look at our own society in our nation and I realize very clearly (this is not a political commentary) that we are living in a sensate stage where it's very clearly dominated by the material understandings of what we do. So laws become more promulgated. We need more rules and we're looking at the material aspects of our life.

This troubles and discourages me because it starts to cause within me, a person who needs to feel humility, to begin to think it is about me. But I think, "Where are we going?" It discourages me to think about Christianity in our nation. The statistics show us that fewer and fewer and fewer people are coming to worship or becoming part of communities of faith. It discourages me when I look at our own denomination. We, as a denomination, have less than half the number we had thirty years ago, and there hasn't been one single year where there has been numerical growth. Not since Dwight D. Eisenhower was president has there been growth.

If you know me, you know that I didn't grow up in the church, but I knew this. If you didn't go to church, you didn't go outside and play but you stayed inside on Sunday morning because you didn't want others to know that you didn't go to church. I don't think that happens anymore. In fact, I think that we compete with organized sports and all kinds of activities that play out on Sunday morning. I get discouraged when I think about our own congregation. We grow, but I don't know why we have 200 more seats tucked away that we don't use. I don't know why, when we have this good news of Christ, that we're not just busting open and needing to add more services. I get discouraged and I wonder if, in fifty years, this congregation will even be here.

You see, when I start to get discouraged like that, I start to realize that what's happening is that the power of God is getting confused with my own ability. What can I do to make it better, How can WE work on it. Then it becomes about me and what I need to do. I look at the life of Christianity in the US and the general rule is that we live in the material. So, we have churches that are dying, congregations that are dying. We think that we need to get into social networking, Facebook, PowerPoint and that it is all about the material things. The understanding of why we are doing it seems to be lost even within the life of the church.

Here is the point. Here is what Moses does. Moses makes the same assumptions that I make. The assumptions Moses makes are very

subtle. In the book of Numbers we are between generations. The first generation of people is beginning to die off. Just a verse earlier, Moses' own sister Miriam dies. Here is a new generation, a second generation that's coming in. In this passage you'll notice Moses makes the same assumptions of the second generation that he did of the first. They are complaining, and he just assumes that that means they have no faith. It plays out in the passage and Moses uses his experience to say, "This is what is going on."

In Numbers, every time the people have come to complain, they have been complaining for the wrong reason. They have been complaining because they are faithless or they don't trust. They don't have any confidence, not only in Moses, but also in what God is doing for them. There is a bunch of stuff even in Moses' own family. Moses' sister Miriam and his brother Aaron reach a point where they decide Moses is getting too much credit. They say, "This is a family thing. Let's have a family thing, a triumvirate." It becomes so destructive that God strikes Miriam with leprosy. And Moses goes to God and says, "Please, Please God. Don't let her have leprosy," when Miriam and Aaron were basically trying to betray him.

So Moses is making an assumption, when this happens, that these people are faithless. But it's not necessarily the case. They grumble and quarrel, but they don't have water. It's not as if they don't have manna but then they want meat, it's not as if they have some but they want more, it's that they don't have it. Then Moses and Aaron go and do what they always do: they go before God and bow down and God tells them what to do and God says, "Take the staff, assemble the congregation and command a rock before their eyes to yield it's water." So Moses and Aaron go back out and they gather the people together and Moses says, "Listen, you rebels. Shall we bring water for you out of rock?" Moses says that assuming that they are rebels like their parents were. Then Moses lifts up his hand and strikes the rock twice with his staff and water comes out abundantly.

What I left out in the middle is what is so critical. Moses says, "Listen, you rebels. Shall WE bring water for you out of this rock?"

What Moses does in this passage is very subtle. Moses, it appears, claims credit for what God does. Now I don't want to beat Moses up too much on that because Moses knows that staff has great authority. How cool would it be to have a staff that you throw down and it becomes a snake or parts water. If you are a benevolent dictator, you can do all kinds of cool stuff with it like helping people. By the way, the symbol of that staff is still used in medicine today. The staff with the snake wrapped around it comes from our Bible.

Moses, as a leader, is not really doing something wrong. He is just establishing authority, but he says, "Should WE (Aaron and I) bring water out?" God then says, "Because you didn't trust in me, you'll never enter in." What is happening in this is that Moses is using something valuable to him. It is his strength, but he is letting it be claimed for himself even for a good reason such as it makes it easier for the people to understand. He is the guy with the staff, let's follow him, let's honor him. That is a sin.

When we get to Jesus, Jesus is so different. Jesus is ending his prayer and, though he's going to be betrayed, beaten, scourged and executed in a horrible way in just the coming hours, he ends his prayer, "Righteous Father, I made your name known to them and I will make it known so that the love with which you have loved me can be in them and I in them." What Jesus is doing is radically different than what Moses did. Jesus is ending by speaking of God. Jesus is God Himself, but he is speaking to his Father. "Righteous Father, make your name known and I will make it known," meaning my trial and my execution made your name known. We come to realize that this is the key for all of us.

Anything that we do that is truly of God means that we are drawn into the life and ministry of God rather than God being drawn into my life. It's not about me saying, "God, I got this really cool thing I want to do. I know you want to do it because it's going to help a lot of people. How about giving me the tools? Help me Lord, enable me to do it. Lord, be my co-pilot so we can get through this." No! It's about having your name known, Lord; it's about being drawn into

your life. It is so much different to say, "Lord, I have this feeling in my life, this brokenness, that I know I want to help someone. I want to bring about good things, Lord, and I want you to help me." How much different is it to pray, "Lord, what is it that breaks your heart? What is it that you are about to do among your people? What is your glory?"

I come to realize that I have a real discouragement very often. I look at our culture and all these things, and I realize that is exactly why God put me here at this time. He put me here because I know that I can't do anything about it. If anything is going to be done, it is going to be done only by God. And the truth is, whether this congregation is going to be here in fifty years has absolutely nothing to do with Jim Wood or Valena Hoy or Jim Gates or whatever name. It has everything to do with the will of our Father.

The truth is that politics is extremely important, and how we lead our government and how we shape and form our government is extremely important, but who is elected president is not going to determine the future and the hope and promise of our nation, but God will. This is the God who created the heavens and the earth. This is the God who made everything. So how dare I think it is about me or even what I think God put in my heart to do?

When I'm in Kenya and I have the opportunity to worship, I often go to mass at the hospital where there is a Roman Catholic priest, Father Tom. He is Irish, and has been in Kenya probably forty years. He is seventy-seven years old and one of the most amazing men I've ever known. I love him. There is so much depth to him. Two weeks ago, Father Tom was preaching in the wards three chairs wide, all the way back people, students nursing students, doctors, patients...amazing things.

A patient who had on his hospital pajamas was there. Out in the hall, he realized that worship was about to begin and he left. I figured maybe he's not Catholic or just doesn't want to be there. But he came back in five minutes. He had his pajamas on, but he had put on a clip-

on tie. I cried. This man wanted to do something to honor his God.

Father Tom began to talk and he beat himself up. He said, "I'm not the prophet I need to be." I don't have the courage to do it, but I know that as I look at the world and the disparity in the world between the rich and the poor, between the healthy and the sick, between wealthy nations and poor, I know that it cannot be sustained. That is why I have committed to read through the Bible for the seventh time this year. My reading the Bible is my gift to Kenya.

What Father Tom knows is that the issues in Kenya are so much bigger than he with his influence and experience. He knows that he will never be able to make a difference, but God can. He knows that if there is going to be a closing of the gap of disparity in this world, if there is going to be hope and promise and healing in this world, it is not going to come from his efforts or from the efforts of men and women. It is going to come from the Word of God being made alive in this world. He believes that that Word of God is not only something that empowers me to go do something, but it is the very thing that actually brings about what it is that we desire.

The real question for us today is: what is so big that you can't confuse yourself with God? What might be speaking to you in some way that is so big you can't confuse yourself with God in the midst of it? "This is not one that I can solve. This is one I can't do anything about. Malaria. Lord, I'm not even a doctor let alone a scientist. I can't do anything about this broken relationship. Every thing that can be done has been done. It's too big!" Well maybe that is the very place that God wants you to live.

You see, that is what our prayer is supposed to be. How does my giving God all the glory shape my prayers? "Lord, you are an awesome, a cool God. Lord, I just need to find my car right now." Or, "Lord I've got this thing in my life right now that I need some help with. I just need to get this thing figured out Lord. Come in and work it for me." How often does it become about God becoming so

small that God's just going to help me find my keys or my car or with one situation or that problem? What if I began to give God the glory throughout my prayers not just as a way to start as a really cool thing? That is what prayers of intercession are about. You and I are called as the people of God to pray for the world in such a way that there is nothing we can do about it. That's why we pray. We know that we're called to be in the flow of the will of God.

I have to be honest with you about these cards, these connection cards. We started these cards for a specific reason. It came from a book that came with a formula, and we decided to follow the formula. The book told us we need to capture information about the people who are visiting. When you pass the pad, visitors don't sign the pad. When you have everyone fill out a card, visitors don't feel singled out. It is a cool way to get information about visitors so we can be in touch with them. The only problem is, you all don't listen that well. I've been honest about myself, now I'll be honest about you. "I hate those cards Jim. I hate those cards. I don't want to fill out those cards, and you ought to know that I'm here." Okay, the cards are about someone else.

The information also said people are much more likely to respond after the sermon, so we make up things for you to do after the sermon so that you'll turn in the card. That way, if someone's visiting next to you, they'll feel like they are part of everything and they'll turn in the card. Are we together? And, we put the prayer section on the cards because we really didn't know what else to put on the card. And here is what happened. Hundreds of you started offering prayers. Some were marked confidential, but the prayers were unbelievable. These were prayers that were fed and led by the spirit of God, I am convinced, and the vulnerability that you brought was overwhelming. It was so overwhelming that we as pastors just couldn't give the attention to it that it deserved. Consequently, we went to our Elders who agreed to help. After every service, they rotate and pray over those cards. They pray over every one of those by name. Our Elders tell us that the most meaningful thing they do in their service to the church is to be able to pray for you.

Some of these prayers are so big that they feel small in light of the prayer. One of you who turns in a card almost every single week is a mom of an autistic child who says, "I pray that he would speak." One of you turns in a card almost every week that asks for wholeness in the spiritual life in your marriage and in your wife's life. One of you offers a prayer on a regular basis for God to open the door for that man, that right man, that man of God to come into your life because that is what you so desperately feel God has called you to do.

We find that these prayers are so much bigger than we ever thought they were. They are about the kingdom of God, and the thing that is so amazing is that, as our Elders are praying over them, they are realizing that they feel so small. That is where I believe God will work His greatest glory. You can pray for your child over and over and over and over. You can lift them up that God's healing would be on them, that the pain in their life, their addictions --you can lift them up over and over, but when you trust enough to allow someone else to be involved in that prayer, someone who knows there is nothing they can do but pray, that is when God's will can be made known.

For those of you in that place of praying for a child, or your parent, or for God to bring someone into your life, continue to pray but give us the privilege of praying with you. Let this be bigger than just getting God to help you in this one thing. Let this be part of the will and the promise of God. Are you praying something big enough? Because if you are not, not only are you cheating God but, ultimately, you are cheating yourself. You see if you are not praying something big enough that you can't do, that only God can do, then you are simply asking God to be a co-pilot. "Just don't let me be lonely tonight--" great James Taylor song, but a horrible way to live. If you believe that it is so big that you can't do it, then that's the flow of God's will for our lives.

When we were in Kenya we had a shift in the rates of HIV infection. The number of rates of infection had been going down for several years due to our assistance and that of the World Health

organization. We were making great progress, but when the funding starts to get lost, things start to get cut. Two years ago in the pediatric ward, we were making such great strides in HIV/AIDS that no more than about fifteen percent of our pediatric patients were HIV positive AIDS patients. When we were there this last month, more than fifty percent were. I witnessed children and women and men dying in ways that I hadn't seen in the last few years.

There was on little boy brought in named Brian. I think he's about thirteen but he looked to be about seven. He couldn't have weighed more than thirty or forty pounds. Brian had AIDS and Brian had the look of AIDS. The pediatrician said that Brian would make it maybe one more night, so sick was he. The pediatrician gave no hope that he would live more than a couple of days.

Our team gets there and as their leader you want your team doing things, you want them protected. Our team goes through the ward and they meet Brian. One particular person on our team was Sally I'Ansen, a young mom herself. Something happened with her and Brian. They just connected. So when Sally wasn't around, you didn't have to ask where she was. She was at the hospital sitting with Brian, reading to him, talking with him, hanging out with him.

A couple of days later Brian's family came and collected him against the counsel of the doctors. They took him to a place about 250 miles away. He had three days supply of medication. Every night we would have our devotional time, and every night Sally would begin this beautiful, lamenting prayer for Brian, and we would all pray and cry. I'm the leader and I'm getting ready. I have to be honest with you that part of my prayer was, "Lord, couldn't you have given Sally someone that was going to make it? Why did you give her a kid that's going to die?" Brian goes 250 miles away, the team finishes out their trip, the team leaves.

About two weeks after Brian was dismissed from the hospital and I'm on my way to the airport, the phone rings. I get a call from a number I don't know and I almost don't answer it. But I do and a

voice says, "Pastor, this is Brian. I just wanted to say, 'Hello, Pastor.'" Here is the thing. I know beyond any shadow of a doubt that Brian shouldn't be alive today--but he is. I'm convinced that little boy is alive today because of the prayers of one woman who led others to pray and who had been relentless. And all the while I had been thinking, "Oh, Lord, I wish you had given her one that was going to be a success." I am being honest with you.

So, what about you? What relationship is it? What situation is it? What place is it in your life that you know that you just can't do it? You can't do it, but you can't let go of it? What is it that is so big that you can't do it? That's where I believe that, today, God could be calling you to let his name be known, to be bound in prayer, to be bound in solidarity and promise because we can't do it. But, our God can do all things and "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." I understand that, but let's be really clear: Paul didn't mean that about me. He means it about being dead to myself so that Christ is alive in me.

What is it that is so big in your life that you try and try and pray and pray and you lift and you lift, but it's been heavy lifting? How can you give it to him right now? And how can you stick with it? I believe that is the hope and the promise of the entire world.