



Senior Minister: Rev. Thomas G. Carr
Minister of Music: Mr. Bruce M. Hector

90 North Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107

Tel: (860) 521-9460 Fax: (860) 521 1855

The Risk of Prayer*

Psalm 51: 1-12

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In the book, The Power and the Glory, Graham Greene tells the story of a man he calls a whiskey priest. During a period of religious persecution, the priest is on the run in the southern part of Mexico. He's not a very good priest because, like a lot of us ministers, he's learned to compromise – a lot.

Greene writes: “The good things of life had come to him too early: the respect of his contemporaries, a safe livelihood, the trite religious word upon the tongue. . . . the ready acceptance of other people's homage. . . .”

The only other remaining priest in the area, Padre Jose, avoids arrest by getting married and promising not to act as a priest. That leaves him in the eyes of the government, “a living witness to the weakness of faith.” Jose takes a long walk in the cemetery and comes upon a grave being dug. The mother of the child being buried recognizes the father and begs him to say a prayer.

“It's against the law,” he says.

The mother begins to cry. “Not a whole service. Just a prayer. She was innocent.”

“It's against the law,” he says and begs her to leave him alone.

An old man standing there pleads: “You can trust us. It's just a short prayer. I'm her grandfather. This is her mother, her father. You can trust us.”

Greene writes:

“. . . But that was the trouble. He couldn't trust anyone. . . . An enormous temptation came to the Padre to take the risk and say a prayer over the grave. He felt the wild attraction of doing one's duty and stretched a sign of the cross in the air; then fear came back. [It was no good praying any longer at all; prayer demanded an act and he had no intention of acting.] Safety waited for him. He knew he was in the grip of the unforgivable sin, despair.”

The whiskey priest knows that his “years are littered with similar surrenders.” He points out: “It's hard for a sleek and well-fed priest to speak of poverty.” He recognizes that he's gotten good at appearing religious, and he wonders: “God might forgive cowardice and passion, but could God forgive the habit of piety?”

After running for weeks, the priest is asked to perform last rites for a dying man. He realizes it's a trap. The police will arrest and execute him, but he goes anyway. As he looks back on his life, the author writes about him:

“. . . He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him, at that moment, that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have taken a little courage. He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted – to be a saint.”

This is the sentence that sticks with me: “It was no good praying any longer at all; prayer demanded an act and he had no intention of acting.

The Padre didn't pray because he didn't want to change. I know that's true for me; have you ever wondered if that's true for you, too? Are there some things you avoid praying about in your life because you have no intention of changing them, or even taking steps to change them?

I read an article this week in which the author was sitting down to his favorite meal, one his wife knew how to make just right, and when she cooked this, she almost always made more than enough. And when they sat down to dinner, and it was her turn to pray, she prayed this way: “God, help us to know when we have eaten enough and to stop.”

How's that for a prayer! Are there some things you just don't pray about?

How about hunger? O, I know we pray for the hungry – all the time – but how about really praying for hungry people? What might the outcome be? Perhaps you just may end up skipping meals and sending money to organizations that feed the hungry. Or the homeless. I know we do pray for the homeless and bring our warm clothes and contribute to homeless shelters. But, what if we prayed and the eyes of our hearts were opened to see that we have an extra guest room in our house. What would be stopping us from welcoming the homeless into our homes? Jesus was the One who said he himself had no place to lay his head – and didn't he say that when you do it to the least of these, you do it to me?

When we pray for huge, international issues we're usually careful, aren't we, because things are always so complex and so big that it's easy to say: “The situation in Uganda or the Congo is so complicated, Lord. I can't do anything about it; I give it over to you.” But what if we prayed, “God, I know they are my brothers and sisters in desperate need, lead me into your purposes for them.” Could it be that God would nod and agree with us and remind us that there are people who are working on this who need money and letters written to elected officials? It's funny that if we really pray about things like this, we'll soon realize that there are things we could do that we haven't done.

I talk a lot about working to counteract global climate change and have made a couple of adjustments in my life style, but I don't really pray too hard about it; if I did, what would that call me to do about my own lifestyle and how much I contribute to the problem when I know that there really is a catastrophe coming down the pike for future generations?

There's no end to the situations in which it's easy to avoid praying. You're in the office and one of your supervisors starts telling a racist or sexist joke, and you know that this is flat-out

wrong, against who you are as a child of God, and you wish somebody would say something. “But me? That’s the one with the power to can me?” Or do you pray, “God, what should I do? Should I challenge my superior?” Do we really want God’s guidance on what we should do?

Or what about praying for discernment for a potential career change or a relationship or when the circumstances of your life seem to say, “Is it time for a change?” What if we really prayed for direction and asked to open ourselves to the whispers of God’s Voice from other people and our own heart? And what if what we heard said something very different than what you’d either been hoping for and expect? It’s hard to really pray, isn’t it?

Especially, I believe, it’s tough to pray for people we don’t like. Think of someone you really don’t like – the person whose presence bothers you the most. He or she may be a family member, a co-worker, or even someone in church(!). For most of us, this person would be the last person for whom we would pray. But when Jesus said “pray for your enemies,” he was inviting us to pray the kind of prayer that will change our attitudes and our actions towards the other or the others.

“Be careful what you pray for; God may answer it in the affirmative,” is an old and true statement. If we really do pray, we may get what we ask for and what we need most, and usually, what is needed most is a change in us. In our culture, most of us choose a life of comfort over a life of prayer that would challenge and change us. It’s easier to live by the same rules our society says are what is true, isn’t it, to strive for the same version of the good life that’s called the American dream – and everything that goes with it. Happens in churches all the time; and extension of the best of our culture, or what we consider the best. We like what we have, don’t we, even our vices, which we know deep down are ours when we sit quiet and listen to our souls. Could it be that we avoid certain kinds of prayers not because our prayers will go unanswered but because we’re afraid they will be answered?

Do you ever pray this – or something like it: “God, make me a better person, but not so much better that I’ll have to change the way I live?” It’s not a bad prayer, but to be honest, it’s lame. I think of my own life and as I mentioned before, if I don’t stop just talking about doing something about global warming and start doing something about it, I wonder what God will say to me when we meet face to face? Real, honest prayer is hard because we don’t want to start doing what God is beckoning us to do or stop doing what we’ve gotten used to.

King David went a long time without really praying. One afternoon, he got caught up in the grip of his power and lust and forced his way upon Bathsheba, someone who was not his, king or not, because he didn’t pray. He then grew scared and figured someone with his power could cover-up things so he had Uriah killed, because he didn’t pray. And he refused to admit what he had done for a long time because he didn’t pray and face up to the harsh realities.

Psalms 51 is the cry of a person who had to struggle to find the courage to pray and the amazing thing about this prayer is that, for all it’s agony, there’s also a sense of relief. What David ignored for so long is finally brought out into the open, even the truth hidden in his own soul and mind. It couldn’t have been any easier for David to tell the truth about himself than it is for any of us, for there is no painless way to stop covering up things or glossing them over and getting real with God. His prayer marks the beginning of honesty with himself and God, which leads, finally, to joy.

What would be the result if we really prayed – for hurting people, for this planet groaning in travail, for our enemies, for victims of tragedies? What would happen – to us – if we searched our spirits and really prayed? What could we become?

No one really knows what might happen but we may know when: to stop eating and begin working at a food pantry once a week; to open our home to a homeless person; write a check to support a life-giving mission; to install solar panels on your roof or the roof of this church building or spend money to insulate your home even if the economic “payback time” is years and years down road; to see your enemy with eyes of compassion; to hear God inviting you to a different place in your spirit or maybe, a different way of working in the world; to end up a little less comfortable and a little more faithful.

Can you and I begin to pray this Lenten season with more courage, prayers that will make us uncomfortable, prayers that would call us to become the change we so desire?

“Lord, listen to your children praying,
Lord, send your Spirit in this place;
Lord, listen to your children praying,
Send us love, send us power, send us grace.”

- Ken Medema

*Many of the ideas in this sermon are taken from an article by Brett Younger in The Baptist Peacemaker, Lent/Eastertide, 2003. Graham Greene’s novel was published in 1986 by Penguin Books.