

“Prayer: Co-Operating with God”

Mark 11: 12-26



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Every time we receive a new member into the church, they make and we renew a four-fold commitment. We say, “I will be loyal to the United Methodist Church and uphold it by my prayers, presence, gifts and service.” I like that vow. First it says that we will not just be loyal to this church but the United Methodist Church as a whole – meaning that we part of a whole family of churches throughout the world. Second, it says that each one of us plays a vital part in being the church and helping the church meet the challenge of making disciples in the world. Your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service are crucial to the success of the gospel. Without them the cause of the gospel suffers. I cannot say it any more clearly than that.

But there is a problem. Membership in American society is often defined in benefit terms rather than commitment terms. We become members by paying fees and then expect certain services and benefits in return. Some people in church giving at the offering time with just that mindset. That is not what it means to be a member of a church. So here is my challenge to you. I invite you to trash the idea of membership. Oh, we will still receive members, but I want us to define ourselves and our relationship together differently. Michael Foss, in his book, *Power Surge*, writes that we need to move from a membership model of church to discipleship model. I agree. One of the most irrelevant statistics I report each year is our number of members.

When I was in El Paso, the church I served there, in the early 1960s, claimed 4,500 members. The weekly attendance in worship was about 600. When the soldiers and their families transferred to Ft. Bliss and they attended once or twice, they were put on the membership roles. In the early seventies, the church office discovered they didn't even have addresses for more than 1/3 of those members.

Just in case you wondered, the membership of St. Luke's Lubbock is about 1,300. But I ask you to ask me a different and better question than, “How many members do we have?” Ask me instead, “How many growing disciples of Jesus Christ do we have?” How many are actively growing in their prayer life and drawing closer to Christ? How many are regularly present in worship and growing in their relationship with God and others at St. Luke's? How many are actively involved in at least one ministry for Christ in the church and one ministry for Christ outside the church that reaches people so that they might find the love of their lives? How many are learning the wonderful adventure of giving to God that changes their lives and helps them reach the world with the gospel?

So I ask you as well as myself, “Are you a growing disciple of Jesus Christ?” We are spending this sermon and the next five to follow dealing with that question. What does a growing disciple look like? What does one say and do? What kind of strength are they creating in the church and what kind of impact are they having on their world? And here is my promise. If you take on this question with an open mind and heart, you will be different on November 5th than you are now, and so will I.

Today, we take on the very fiber of who we are as we grow in our relationship with God, with each other and with our world – the fiber of prayer. Matt chose our scripture lesson for today. It is a lesson on prayer and it is considered to be one of the most difficult passages to interpret in all the New Testament. Thanks,

Matt. It's the only miracle that Jesus does that is a negative. He curses and destroys a fig tree. More than that, it's the only time that Jesus does a miracle that was meant for his own feeding. We are told at the very front of this that it wasn't the season for bearing fruit yet. Figs grow leaves about two months ahead of bearing fruit. The tree was doing exactly what it was supposed to do. On the face of it, Jesus is impish. He curses the bush just because he can and because he is impatient. At least that's the way it looks.

Reece and I were talking about this passage and he said simply, maybe it's not about whether the act was justified, but maybe it's about the lesson. Aren't you glad for teenage to the point conversation? Sometimes. Reece is right. And the Bible has other times when people do things that are odd. In the Old Testament, Hosea marries the prostitute Gomer as a public illustration of Israel's unfaithfulness to God. That doesn't mean that God is pro-prostitution, but it was a pretty dramatic object lesson. There is no doubt that Jesus' cursing of the fig tree was partly to illustrate that Israel's faith had become fruitless. It looked good on the outside, but when you pulled back the leaves the people of God were not who they claimed to be and they were not making the difference in their city, country and world they for which they were chosen and blessed.

It's no accident that Mark places the cleansing of the temple right after the cursing of the fig tree. The temple leadership was so busy making the place look good that they no longer were the house of prayer. They had unwittingly become a façade with nothing inside. They were "nothing but leaves." This is the original sin of institutional religion. We gather. We pray, preach, sing and take the offering. We go to classes. We meet in committees and we do mission work. We take care of our buildings. But it can become hollow. The Methodist movement developed in England, because the Anglican Church had become hollow. The charismatic movement developed in the United States because mainline churches had become hollow. The emerging church movement presently developing in churches challenges us to see if we are again becoming hollow. It's worth asking ourselves personally. Yes, we may be doing the right things in our Christian lives, but have we become hollow – empty and fruitless with little impact on the world around us? One of the great old and forgotten hymns of the church sings,

Nothing but leaves, the spirit grieves o'er years of wasted life,
Sins indulged while consciences slept, o'er vows and promises unkept, perhaps
from years of strife;
Nothing but leaves, nothing but leaves!

Nothing but leaves, no gathered sheaves of life's fair ripening grain:
We sow our seeds; lo, tares and weeds;
Words, idle words for earnest deeds, then reap with toil and pain,
Nothing but leaves, nothing but leaves.

Ah! Who shall thus the Master meet, and bring but withered leaves?
Ah! Who shall at the Savior's feet, before the awful judgment seat, lay down for golden sheaves?
Nothing but leaves, nothing but leaves.

The disciples then pass by the fig tree on the way home and they see that the curse of the fig tree was complete – as it lay there dried up and dead. You can hear the disciples say, "How did you do that?" And we are led to a discussion that moves from the house of prayer to the power of prayer. As a people of prayer in the house of prayer, this scripture then gives us the two ingredients of powerful prayer. The first ingredient is belief. Jesus says,

"Have faith in God. I tell you truly – whoever will say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and cast into the sea,' and who in his heart does not doubt, but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him...believe that you will receive everything that you pray and ask, and it will be done for you."

Of course, there is no reason to have the mountain cast into the sea. In that area, the mountain was a key metaphor for anything that was overwhelming. It was used often in sayings. But what is striking is the absolute confidence of Christ about prayer. If you believe it, you will receive it. The analytical part of me wants to immediately question these words of Jesus. I want to say, "Jesus, not everything people believe for do they need to receive. Some prayers are selfish prayers and some may not be God's will." I want to say, "Jesus, lots of people believe and they do not receive. They are fervent in their prayers and deeply devoted in their walk with you. And I am not convinced that lack of belief is why they did not receive what they believed." I'm not alone in my questions. The disciples themselves discovered that they could not get the same results from their prayers that Jesus did. But for people like me, the teachings and the miracles of Jesus, question us as well. Jesus invited people to belief, not requiring a lot of it, just more than they were used to using. People's faith, their willingness to believe beyond what they can see or what they are used to, was one of the key ways Jesus invited people to co-operate with him. And, despite my struggle with doubts, I have discovered over the years what I have shared with you before, that "faith creates its own reality." One of the definitions of the church is that it is "a community of faith." Jesus teaches us that believing leads to receiving. I've never seen doubt that led to receiving. Some of you in this church have a special gift of faith. I have two associate pastors and a business manager on staff who have that gift. They inspire my faith. May the people of St. Luke's Lubbock, choose to live life more out of our faith than in our doubts, and see what God is able to do.

The other ingredient in this scripture lesson for powerful and co-operative prayer is a forgiving heart. Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Forgiveness is what cleanses our souls. One of the chief maladies of Americans is arteriosclerosis, the hardening of the arteries that happens as material accumulates on the walls of our blood vessels. Examinations of those who have died in war as young soldiers has revealed that those young men in their late teens and early 20s were already showing development of arteriosclerosis. Well there is also a hardening of our spiritual arteries that happens as we allow unforgiveness of things little and big to accumulate. Salvation is like getting a heart bypass or even a heart transplant. But if we do not change our spiritual diet then spiritual arteriosclerosis will again develop. When we forgive, our spirits flow openly with God's Spirit and we are able to connect with God and be used of God. Again, just as by faith, in forgiveness we co-operate with God.

A common bumper sticker says "God is my co-pilot." Brothers and sisters in Christ, if God is your co-pilot you are in the wrong seat! In the words of the old hymn, "Jesus, Savior pilot me!" We are called to co-operate with God. Our faith and our forgiveness allow us to do that. And when we do, life happens in a whole new dimension. Hearts are healed and sometimes bodies are healed, too. Jobs are provided or maybe our attitudes are transformed in the jobs we already have. Relationships are reconciled or, when that doesn't happen, new relationships develop. Lives are saved by the grace of God and re-energized and renewed by God's Spirit. Churches become aware that there is more to them than the sum of their parts and they are no longer institutions and memories but a community-changing, world-changing movement. I don't know about you, but my God has been too small and probably still is too small. When do we finally take the shackles off God and let him operate in and through us? I don't know about you, but my memories and past hurts have been too large and still may be. When do we finally let go off of that and allow God to fully operate in and through us? Why not now?