

## To Pray or Not to Pray: That Is the Question!

**Hear O people of God: The Lord our God, the Lord, is One. He is our shepherd and sure Deliverer; we shall have no others gods apart from Him.**

I spent at least half of this past Wednesday with Bud and Ruth Mitchell. Thus far, Bud's liver transplant is a great success. The half liver lobe Bud received from Rachelle Jeffers is growing into a brand new liver! It is functioning according to plan and Bud is feeling more and more like himself with each passing day. In fact, the greatest physical complaint Bud has now is pain from a back injury he suffered before his surgery. Truly, Bud is a walking miracle.

We are also delighted with the progress Rachelle has made following her sacrifice. First she was back to singing and now she is back to work. Her fearless obedience to the prompting of the Holy Spirit remains an inspiration to us all.

But there is one other person and one other set of gifts that have worked together to bring Bud back from the precipice of death. It was the faith, prayers, determination, shameless persistence and absolute refusal to take "no" for an answer exhibited by Ruth Mitchell that gave Bud Mitchell his opportunity to have a new lease on life. First, she did a number on Bud in convincing him to go for the transplant. Second, Ruth was the one who advertised Bud's need, letting everyone know his need for a new liver. Third, Ruth convinced the transplant surgeon in Pittsburgh to change his mind regarding Bud's surgery. The surgeon had initially ruled out doing the procedure on Bud because he deemed Bud to be too old to benefit from it. According to the protocols the doctor lived by in his practice, Bud was too old for the surgery.

We've talked about the fantastic odds against finding an almost perfect liver match for Bud in the same town and even in the same church. But what are the odds that a very busy transplant surgeon, who has to be incredibly sure of himself to do what he does—what are the odds of a man like that reversing his decision and deciding to operate on Bud after he had initially ruled it out? I don't know about you, but when I think that through I find myself standing on holy ground. That's got to be an answer to prayer and a further witness to the effectiveness of Ruth's gift of persuasiveness.

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And, finally, it's Ruth who works as Bud's trainer and corner-man as he fights the bout to regain his health. She coaches, coaxes, and when necessary coerces him to do what he needs to do. She scolds and shames him into continuing when the going gets tough and he wants to throw in the towel. Ruth isn't very big, but for all that the Lord has brought her through, she is tough as nails.

I think of King David's declaration in Psalm 18:29: *"With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall."* In the New Living Translation, it says *"I can scale any wall."* Or, as Paul says in Philippians 4:13, *"I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength."* It's evident to me that God's giants come in all shapes and sizes; our sister Ruth is one of God's fearless giants.

In our Scripture passage for this morning from Isaiah 8, the prophet hears God giving him this challenge: Isaiah says,

*"This is what the Lord says to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people: Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread."*

In Isaiah's day, the Israelites had become weak and wishy-washy in their faith. Facing a growing threat from the Assyrian Empire, whose king was bent on conquest, and seeing what his armies were doing against other nations, the Israelites and inhabitants of Judah, felt the hot breath of disaster breathing down their necks. In panic mode, they prayed to other gods and their leaders sought to make alliances with other nations, especially Egypt, to help them against Assyria. Rumors of impending doom and conspiracy theories were rampant among them.

Thus God warns Isaiah not to get caught up in the plague of anxiety that had come upon the majority of others. He was told not to buy into their conspiracy theories, not to fear what others feared nor to dread what they were dreading. Instead of giving in to the psychosis of the mob, Isaiah was challenged to remember his God as the Lord Almighty. He was challenged to remember the holiness of the Lord, to worship Him and to fear Him alone.

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All of this poses a question for each believer here this morning: How do we react when trouble comes our way or when our health or way of life are threatened? And this is not just a rhetorical or theoretical question. For, if not now, sooner or later everyone of us will find ourselves in the cross hairs of the Devil's schemes to destroy us. We will be tempted to give our attention to his threats. We will be tempted to panic. We will be tempted to buy in to enemy propaganda. We will be tempted to seek help from charlatans and to put our hope in false gods. Ultimately, we will be tempted, like Job in the Bible was tempted, to give up—to *"just curse God and die."*

But we need to make up our minds now that when that day comes, or even if it is here now for some of us, however scary the threats may be, and no matter how many evil rumors or conspiracy theories we hear, we are going to honor the Lord. As Job also said, *"Even though He (the Lord) slays me, yet will I trust Him."* We need to determine as individuals and as a church that our God is the Lord Almighty. He is the Holy One. And, we will fear nothing or no one besides Him. We will allow nothing or no one to turn our heads or our hearts away from Him. He is the One we will trust, and He is the One we will turn to and pray to in our times of need.

Furthermore, we need to set our hearts to take a page out of Ruth Mitchell's playbook. In Luke 18:1-8, we read:

*"Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: 'In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'"*

*For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'"*

*And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"*

The difficulty we may have in interpreting this parable is the temptation to somehow equate God with an unjust judge. Or to think that somehow we can harass God or threaten Him to grant our requests. Surely this would be to insult God and weaken Him in our eyes.

No, the way to understand this parable is to compare it with what Jesus says about prayer in Luke 11:13: He says: *"If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"*

Concerning the Parable of the Unjust Judge, we could put it in these words: If persistence in asking can sometimes get us justice even from an evil judge, how much more will persistence in asking get us what we need from the God who loves us and is glorified in answering our prayers.

The point of the Parable of the Unjust Judge is revealed in the introduction given by Luke where he says, *"Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up."*

This is why I say we need to set our hearts to take a page out of Ruth's playbook. Her persistence in serving as advocate for her husband, which included her reasoning and pleading with the transplant surgeon in Pittsburgh to change his mind about Bud's surgery, shows us how to pray for our needs and how to intercede for others.

Hebrews 4:14-16 say: *"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."*

But here's another question for us to deal with this morning: What if our faith in God is weak? What, if the truth be known, our trust in God's care for us is so weak that we feel it a waste of time to bother Him with

our needs? What if we just don't believe in our hearts in the effectiveness in prayer? What, if although we know it's in the Bible that we are instructed to pray, we just don't have the confidence that it will do any good to pray? What are we to do about that?

The story is told about that great evangelist and founder of the Methodists, John Wesley, that he failed in his first missionary journey to America. After that experience he soon came to the conclusion that he lacked the faith to continue his ministry. In fact, he may have given up on the whole thing were it not for the advice of one of God's special servants. All of you have heard the name John Wesley, but I wonder how many know the name Peter Bohler?

Well, when Wesley came to the conclusion that he lacked the faith he needed, he asked his friend Peter what he should do. Peter Bohler said to him: "Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith." Wesley followed Bohler's advice, and the rest, as they say, is history!

It seems to me that the same principle applies to the discipline of prayer. In other words, when we don't feel like praying and when we doubt that praying will do any good, the thing to do is to obey God and pray anyway. If we don't have the faith to pray we need to pray until we do and, then, when we do, we will pray with faith. Like most anything else, learning to pray effectively takes practice, and the more we practice at praying the more effective in praying we will become.

It also seems to me that the great tragedy we see in so many weakened Christians and Christian churches across America is that we all have what we need but fail to recognize it and put it into practice. God invites us, even pleads with us, to come boldly before His throne with bold and persistent prayers so He can show Himself faithful and powerful in answering our prayers, but so many of us fail to ask and to keep on asking till the answer comes. Although this is the way it is, it doesn't have to stay that way. God calls us to pray until we gain the faith to pray heaven down to earth, until God's kingdom comes and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. If we do nothing else during these summer months of Pentecost, let us learn to pray. Many more miracles await us!

## The Fourth Street Church of God

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Sermon for July 23, 2017

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Isaiah 8:11-13; Luke 18:1-8

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