

SERMON: “ABOUT WORSHIP ... WE RESPOND & WE PRAY”
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT GENESIS 32:22-32
NEW TESTAMENT PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

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INTRODUCTION

Father's Day 2010. I was on sabbatical. My focus was on African-American Spirituality.

I got a small grant and was able to travel to South Africa, stayed in the home of a pastor who was doing his doctoral work at Columbia Seminary in Atlanta.

He used my car while I stayed at his house. I also arranged a trip to nearby Zimbabwe and Victoria Falls (I love waterfalls, always wanted to go there)

Victoria Falls is one of the most beautiful places on God's green earth

It appeals to all of your senses – you feel it, hear it, see it, smell it

Sunday morning we went to town to do some shopping at the market

Lots of handmade crafts to take home, help you remember your trip.

About shopping in Zimbabwe. It comes with a guide

A crowd of locals will swarm you as a tourist, you need to pick one and tip them

My guide was very friendly, very helpful. As we finished our shopping, he asked

if there was anything else he might do for us. I had an answer for him

I asked if he knew where I might go to church that evening

He invited us to go to his church, said he would send a driver for us.

My oldest daughter, Sophie Ann, went with me (she is always up for an adventure)

Her brothers stayed back at the hotel. Grace and Beth were home in Georgia

I've learned to be open and go with the flow worshipping in other churches

I figured I would be asked to preach. I was and I did.

It was the prayer time after the sermons that offered the surprise.

We sang a hymn, then the pastor invited us to pray. He didn't ask us to sit down first

so I stood there with my eyes closed and prayed, pretty soon thereafter I noticed

movement around me. I opened my eyes and saw people moving around

in little circles as they prayed, their hands open in front of them

They looked like Miles Davis on stage, wandering around playing his horn

That memory has stuck with me and sticks out today as we talk about prayer

And, in particular, the prayer time after the sermon we call the prayers of the people

I like that mental picture from a church in Zimbabwe of 'the prayers of the people.'

I like how it is both individual and corporate with people wandering around

and amongst each other, hands open to God and to one another

Our worship time together includes several prayers, add them up

A prayer of confession as we lean into the gift that is God's mercy

A prayer for illumination as we open God's word and listen

And after we've heard God's word, the prayers of the people

OF THE PEOPLE

Type into the search engine “prayers of the people – Presbyterian”

This is what you find. I think it is a good definition of this part of the service.

“Prayers of the People” are a vital part of worship in the Presbyterian Church, offering a communal opportunity for intercession, thanksgiving, and reflection on the needs of the church and the world.

Show image – The Prayers of the People

The point I want to lift up this morning is that this prayer is meant to be communal, It is of the people, by the people and for the people – a bit of everything and everyone. I think this is the kind of prayer Paul is encouraging in his letter to the Philippians – prayer in the plural, in everything, for everyone.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

“But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made know to God.” In everything, he says
And he says this after speaking to their anxiety – don’t need to be anxious
And he says this before he assures them that “peace of God, which surpasses all understanding will guard our hearts (plural) and our minds (plural) in Christ.

I forgot to tell you earlier about that church in Zimbabwe – their prayers of the people
They prayed walking around and amongst one another with hands open to God and to one another. And they did so not in silence but with a quiet murmuring of their prayers with and for each other and for others. Just enough to hear, but not so loud as to drown each other out. Enough to know someone is praying for you

Praying like this is a good way to follow Paul’s lead and not be anxious
Why? Because we know someone, lots of someones, are praying for us
They may not be walking around and amongst us quietly voicing their prayers but they are putting the ‘of the people’ in the “prayers of the people.”

In this ‘Place for Everyone’ we have emphasized the “of the people” prayers in a variety of ways. One practice I found when I got here. The pastor, Eric, was asking for your prayer concerns and you were voicing them out loud then and there. Made me nervous at first. Got to learn lots of names quickly. And I’ve got to do better with my handwriting

There was a Sunday I heard a prayer request, wrote in down quickly then could not read my own writing. Thank you for your patience.
I’ve also learned to repeat the request so we get it right and so you can hear it

AFTER THE SERMON

Paying attention to the flow of our worship together, I pray you see how it follows an intentional pattern, a natural one. Worship is, to put it simply, an encounter with the living God, being in God's presence.

When we realize we are before God we begin with a sense of awe
We sing God's praise, then it hits us ... we fall short of what God expects of us
We confess our sin, lean into the gift of God's grace – then we pass that peace
Then as forgiven people, we listen to what God has to say to us
We read the scriptures, share them with our children.
We hear a sermon in song and sermon from the pastor

That word from God invites and expects a response. So, what comes next?
Yes, a song. Like a musical, we just got to sing. Then prayer
Not just a private prayer but prayers of the people ... praying for others
God's word is always expanding our circles, isn't it? Pushing us out

Did you notice the bulletin cover, maybe think "What is Dave thinking?"
I typed into Google a few phrases, one was "after the sermon"
This is what I got. It is a painting by the French painter, Paul Gauguin
entitled "Vision after the Sermon."

It depicts a scene from the Bible in which Jacob wrestles an angel
or as many interpret the story – with God. It depicts this indirectly
through a vision that the women see after a sermon in church.
Does this preacher expect you to have visions after the sermon? No.
But the idea of wrestling with God ... Yeah I'd like that

Might that be a way to think about the prayers of the people?
One way to wrestle with the needs of this beautiful and brutal world?
To plea with God to get in the ring and wrestle with the things that trouble us,
To ask God to wrestle with us as God did with Jacob, set us on the right path

The prayers of the people follow the reading, preaching and God's word
God's word invites and expects a response – wrestle with what God is telling you
What better way to do that than to pray? Especially a prayer that is designed
to open us outward, to pray for those near and dear, for the neighbors
we are commanded to love, neighbors near and far

In our 'prayers of the people' we have prayed one by one for every nation in this world
God so loves (took 5 years, Sunday after Sunday). And we prayed in similar fashion
for every state, including DC, and the native lands before us in these United States
I had lots of fun doing that, picking the pictures, learned a lot too

We did all that praying for different people and places not just because
one of your pastors is a geography nerd. We prayed for all those different people
to be very "of the people" and for the people in our prayers

SUMMARY

We did so because one really good way to love our neighbors,
as Jesus commands us to do, is to make the effort to know them
to learn about them ... to pray for them

Prayers of the people does mean prayers for the people
“In everything by prayer and supplication” means in prayer for everyone

That’s why I have regularly encouraged you to pray the news – prayers of the people

Let me explain that a bit more, try to tie it in with the wrestling imagery
Best be careful when we pray the news. So many of our news sources
(with 24/7 news, pundits and podcasts and provocateurs) seem like
a mix of ESPN with a focus on who’s winning and People magazine,
with the inside scoop (and / or dirt) about a celebrity

I’m certainly not asking you in praying the news to pray for winners and losers
I’m not talking about wrestling to cheer on someone in a mask jumping off
the ropes ready to land their 280 pounds of oiled up muscle onto their foe

The notion of “in everything by prayer and supplication” fits in these verses
between the encouragement to let everyone know our gentleness
and the comfort of knowing the peace of God guards our hearts and minds
So, maybe we ought to push that WWE imagery out of our minds

I’d like you to think about wrestling a little differently with you
in your prayers and dreams, like Jacob did, wrestling with God

I’m asking you to pray the news, to pray for others
not by praying for a certain outcome, not for your side to win
but for God to bless you like Jacob was blessed ...
he was the one who was changed by the encounter

Prayer can change the world, especially praying of and for the people
Prayer changes the world by changing us and how we see the world
Wrestle with that, will you please?