

“A Praying Church”

Dear Friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus. It's good to be with you here today as we kickoff our fall season and as we prepare ourselves for what lies ahead in the coming year.

It was a good summer, a crazy summer, a number of things that made it fill up and go by too quickly. Here at the church, Pastor Judy was on sabbatical; a much-deserved time away. We had a full slate of summer camps; there were nine weeks (out of 12) with kids here on campus. And we took on and completed an office addition, adding two new offices and really shuffling the deck with our staff.

Almost everyone is working out of a new space. It's not completely put back together yet. Hopefully that'll happen in the next couple of weeks. In the meantime, if you haven't seen it, I hope you can find some time to take a look.

On a personal level, it was also a good summer. There were a number of changes in our family. Our oldest daughter, Elizabeth, for the first time, signed a lease on an apartment and has moved out; an exciting time for her. Our youngest daughter, Rebecca, went down to Biola (near Los Angeles) and is beginning her final year in college. And, as of today, Mary and I are celebrating a milestone in our married life.

Today marks the exact date when we have now completed (and survived) 13½ years with teenagers in our house! Can you believe it! Today is our youngest son, Andy's, 20th birthday. You can congratulate us anytime you'd like. For those of you still in it, there is light at the end of the tunnel!

Before turning to our text, let's begin by turning to God in prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the summer months and for the chance we have had to slow down and gain some renewal and refreshment. We pray that you would be with us here today, opening our hearts to sense your presence, opening our minds to understand what you have to say, and (through your Holy Spirit) to challenge us and encourage us and invite us to build our lives on Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

A number of years ago, I had the chance to attend a gathering of senior pastors serving in some of the larger congregations in the United States. One of the presenters was Jim Collins, author of “Good to Great” and “Built to Last.” In his presentation he made an interesting comment. He said that visionary companies (without exception) know what they're willing to go out of business for. They know what they're willing to go out of business for. And then he asked us, “What would you be willing to go out of business for?”

I remember thinking (when he asked it) that that's a tough question to answer, because I'm 100% convinced that the Church of Jesus Christ will never go out of business. It's built on the rock of our faith. It's eternal, everlasting – not even the gates of hell (the Bible says) will prevail. When I first thought about the question, I wasn't sure how I would respond.

And then he said that unless you can figure out what you're willing to go out of business for, you'll never be able to clearly identify what business you are in.

All of a sudden it became clear. From that moment on, I knew that I needed to commit the rest of my life to making disciples, to doing (with my life) what Jesus has called and commissioned (all of us) to do. I also knew that for as long as I was called to serve as one of the pastors in this place, that this place would also be committed to building and making and growing disciples who understand their calling to be nothing more (nor less) than to make more disciples.

For the past several months we've been introducing new ways to think about what we're doing. They're not new concepts for us, new ideas. What we're doing today, and what we'll be doing tomorrow, is no different than what we've done in the past. But they do involve new approaches and they will require us to think and to work in new ways.

Rather than following a purpose-driven model, built upon the strength of the programs of the church, we are shifting to a disciple-producing model, built upon the strength of developing relationships and leading people to become followers of Jesus Christ.

Instead of the five-M's from the old model, we're now talking about base and front. The base is what happens here at St. Timothy's: worship, Sunday school, Bible classes, opportunities to serve. The front is what

happens beyond our walls: discipleship huddles, missional communities, house churches, sharing our faith. Our goal is to strengthen the base and increase the front.

Now, normally, in this kickoff Sunday sermon, I've used the time to highlight what lies ahead, focused on ways to get involved and to grow. What I want to do today, (instead of looking ahead) and jumping right in is to take a step back and slow ourselves down.

If you were here at the beginning of the summer, you might remember that I preached a sermon in which I challenged those who (were here) to commit themselves to praying every day from the time that sermon was preached (on Ascension Day) until today (on our Kickoff Sunday). And I said that for anyone who did, that there'd be a chance to share. Later on in our prayer time this morning, we'll be hearing from a few of those who took me up on the challenge.

I prayed for four things. For the enrollment in our school, for the mission-driven focus of (our church body) the NALC, for clarity in our staffing direction here at the church, and for my own faith. Some of the prayers were answered in the way I had hoped; others not quite there. But they were all answered.

Our church council and strategic planning team helped us to clarify a direction for our church staff. As a result, we added one position, a Director of Discipleship Ministries, and we put in place a plan that will help us with some of the staffing transitions that will happen in the next few years. We're in a much better (and clearer) place today than we were then.

In the NALC, with that mission-driven focus, the day after I started praying, I received a phone call from the national office, asking me to be the Bible study presenter at our national convocation; an opportunity to help set a mission direction for the more than 700 pastors and lay leaders who were there at the gathering in July.

On the enrollment front, I prayed for 35 students to be added to the 95 who had enrolled at the time. As of today, we're at 117; not what I had prayed for; we're not quite there. There's still more work and more prayer needing to happen.

And as far as my own faith, I can tell you without hesitation that I have seen and experienced and listened to story after story of how God has worked and responded to the prayers of his people. Not always in the way the one praying had hoped, but always as a result of a life and a heart open and submissive to his will.

The title for our message today is "A Praying Church" (a praying church). That not only describes what I hope (and pray) we will become, but also what the early church was. It was a praying church. It was a church that knew and understood and practiced the discipline and the commitment of prayer.

Acts, chapter one, Jesus ascends into heaven. Before he goes, he promises them the gift of the Holy Spirit, and then he tells them that they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And then it says, "After he had said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight."

I can only imagine what they must have felt. Jesus died, he was raised from the dead, with them for 40 days, he lays out this mission for them (to go to the ends of the earth), and then he goes away.

Now, they're not an educated bunch. They have no funding, no resources to speak of. They have no formalized training. There're only eleven of them. I can just picture them saying (to each other), "So, what are we supposed to do now?" What are we supposed to do now?

Think back for a moment to a time in your life when you might have asked that question. Maybe you're in a season like that right now. You're just trying to figure out "What am I supposed to do now?"

Often times, when we ask that question, it's with a tone of desperation. You just found out that a position at your work has been eliminated and you're no longer employed. "What am I supposed to do now?" You find out that your marriage is falling apart and your spouse wants a divorce. "So what am I supposed to do now?" You go to your doctor, get the test results and they're not good. "So, now what? What am I supposed to do now?"

Sometimes it's in desperation. Sometimes it's because we're simply confused, don't know what to do. Like that time when you came home from the hospital with your first child. You were all ready for the pregnancy and the birth, but now what? This little baby depends on you. Do you know what you're doing? Or you just finished college, you have your diploma, but you're just not sure what to do next.

Sometimes it's out of desperation; sometimes confusion. Sometimes it's with excitement, a sense of anticipation, but you're not sure about the next steps. You just landed that new job, but it's all so new. You're

newlywed, beginning a new life together, but it's still a new chapter. Or you just heard this new vision at your church and it sounds exciting, but still a bit unclear as to what it all means.

I have to believe that the disciples, when Jesus left them, that they were feeling all three. Desperation, confusion, excitement? It's not just us, it was also them.

Here's what I want you to know. Whenever you ask that question, (What am I supposed to do now?) there is always an answer. There is always an answer. We ask it (oftentimes) as if there isn't; like there's no answer. But there is always an answer. And the answer is always the same. It's always the same: pray, pray.

Chapter one, verse 14 (it says): "They all joined together constantly in prayer." They were constantly (it says), continually in prayer.

Let me tell you something. That's the secret. That's what moves a church from being a church that prays to a praying church. That's what moves a person from being a person that prays to a praying person. "They were constantly in prayer." It says they kept on praying no matter what.

Now, for some of you, this is nothing new. You're already doing it. For many, this is a big life-change. And it's a big life-change because some of the things we've learned (over the years) about prayer are actually working against us. (I really believe that.) Now, they're not bad, in fact, they're good. But they can (without our even realizing it) get in the way. They don't need to be thrown out, but re-learned.

Let me give you an example. There's a right time to pray. (Isn't that right?) That's what I learned. Before bedtime, before meals, at the beginning of the day. Those are the times you're supposed to pray.

Now, no one ever said to pray only at those times. Prayer is something that can happen at any time. There's never a wrong to time to pray. But to whatever degree we learned that there's a right time to pray, we don't want to throw that out, but to build on it, to re-learn it, to expand it: all throughout the day; any time we want.

Let me give you another example. There's a right time to pray. There's a right way to pray. Same thing. (It's not bad.) Fold your hands, bow your heads, close your eyes; then you can pray. That's all good. Jesus even taught some of it, so we need to be careful. Get rid of the distractions. Find a quiet place. Sit still, turn off your phone. (Now, there's a challenge.) Turn it off; nothing wrong with that. It's all good.

But what that does, or what (at least) it can do is to give us this idea that there's a right way, and if you're not doing it the right way, then it doesn't work.

Let me give you a challenge (here today), and this is where this is all going. (Don't mishear what's being said.) Before bedtime, before meals, fold your hands, it's all good. Let me give you a challenge (and it's the first of two) I want you to try. Here's the first: for this next week, rather than praying with your eyes closed, I want to challenge you to pray with your eyes open. Pray with your eyes open.

That means that when you go for a walk in your neighborhood that you pray for the people you see and for the families who live in those homes, with your eyes open. When you go to the gym, instead of just working out, pray for the others who are working out. At school or at work, in the break room or at lunch, don't just talk with the people you see, but pray for those people God has set in your path.

I'll tell you that it changes the way you see things. It changes the way you relate to God. Next time you watch the news, don't just watch the news, but pray the news. Pray for our leaders, pray for the conflicts in the world. Next time you watch the game, don't just watch the game, but pray the game. Pray that God would smite those heathens on the other side. (You get the point.) I'm trying to be more intentional about it in my own life. It's amazing how it works.

A few weeks back I was in WalMart, waiting in line to check out. Usually when I'm in line, I'm looking at the other lines, wondering which one would have been faster. This time I decided to just wait and pray for those ahead of me.

The person ahead of me was a young mom. (I wondered if she were a single mom.) She had two kids, trying to keep it all together. She had all her things on the counter, got to a certain point, and she said, "That's all the money I have. Go ahead and put the rest back."

I tried not to stare. I even took a step back, so she wouldn't be embarrassed. I started praying, "God, please help this young mom. Maybe with someone who knows her situation, who can help, who might have just overheard what just happened, who has a chance to help out." (It's funny how God answers those prayers.)

She finished up, loaded her two kids, walked away. I put my things on the counter, saw these WalMart gift cards (staring me in the face), and knew what I had to do.

I walked out as quickly as I could, saw her loading her things into her car, walked up and gave her this card and said, "I think Jesus wanted me to give this to you." From what I could tell, I think she was appreciative. Maybe a bit weirded-out. It didn't matter.

As I walked back to my car, I started crying. Not because of what just happened, but because of how many opportunities for what-might-have-just-happened I must have missed, if I'd been praying with my eyes opened more often.

I'd challenge you this next week to pray with your eyes open. Keep on looking, keep on talking, keep on listening to what God wants you to hear, because he wants you to hear. He has so much to give.

That's the first challenge. The second is to try something different here this morning, and it ties in with the first lesson we read. Remember the story? It's a fascinating story, in the Old Testament: Exodus 17. Moses and Joshua and the nation of Israel are about to go into battle with the Amalekites.

Remember what happens? Moses tells Joshua to go down into the valley and fight. Meanwhile, Moses goes up on the mountain and begins to pray. Sounds sort of like a copout, like he's throwing Joshua under the bus. But he's not. He's entering into the battle, only in a different way.

You remember. Moses stands on the mountain and prays. When he lifts his hands to God, the nation of Israel wins. When he lowers his hands (they get tired), here come the Amalekites.

Can't you picture it? Up and down. Up and down. I wonder when Moses realized what was happening? Did he do one of these, just to see what God would do? It would have been fun to watch! It's a great story! It's a fascinating chapter. It's a picture of life.

My friends, the battle of life isn't fought only on the field. The battle of life is fought also on the mountain, praying to God, submitting our lives to his will, trusting that what he's doing in our lives is all for his glory.

I want to challenge you today to try it; not to change this Lutheran congregation into a bunch of Pentecostals, but (if for nothing else) as a one-day reminder of our dependence on God.

In the Old Testament, hands raised signified two things. One, that God is great and we are not. And two, our daily dependence on him. Jesus taught us to pray, asking God for our daily bread. I'll bet when the markets crashed (a few years back) there was more was praying (going on) than there is now. How come? Because we were reminded of our dependence on God.

Guess what. You are just as dependent on God when things are going well (in your life) as when they are not. We just don't remember it quite so clearly. It's a daily dependence.

Today I want to challenge you to something a bit different. And even if it feels strange, I want you to try it. (We have two/three hymns/songs left in our worship before it's over.) I want to challenge you today, as a reminder of our daily dependence on God, to lift your hands during those hymns/songs.

Now, if you don't do it (all the way), that's OK. You can do it in little ways. Just hold your hands like this, (at your side), like a ninja. There's nothing wrong with ninja's in the church.

You can hold your hands like this, like you're carrying a stack of wood. Every congregation needs some wood-stackers.

You can pretend you're an escalator, if you don't want to go all the way. One hand up, one hand down. Whatever you want.

And if you're really up for it, you can do the double high-five. Just go for it. You could even do the YMCA. Nothing wrong with that.

I don't want this to be silly. That's not the point. I do want it to be different and to be remembered. And so does Jesus.

Saint Benedict established (what was called) the Benedictine Order. It was in response to the worldly approach to life that says all we need to do is to work. (He knew better.) He had this saying: "Ora Labora." "Ora" meaning to pray. "Labora" meaning to work. "To pray is to work." He said that prayer needs to be our chief work.

And so, there are the challenges. Pray (this week) with your eyes open. Pray (here today) with your hands raised. Prayer allows us to be constantly in the presence of Jesus, continually submitting ourselves to his will.

Let me close with a story. It's about a man I met years ago. The man was growing old, unable to care for himself, so the family's best option was to put him in a care home. And it was a good place, a helpful place, it was a good decision.

The family came to see their father every Sunday. They'd drive to be with him every week. It was this man's favorite time. He'd always wait for his family on Sundays, couldn't wait to see them.

As he grew older, he became more confused. After a while, he had a hard time even recognizing his kids, had a hard time making it back to his room. But he was always there when they showed up.

One day, when his daughter arrived, there he was waiting. She said, "Daddy, do you know what day it is?" He said, "No." She said, "So, how did you know to wait today?" He said, "I wait every day."

That's a picture of God. That's what God the Father does for us. He's waiting for you. He's waiting to hear your voice. Each day, every day, it's his favorite time of the day, favorite time of the week, when you begin a conversation with him...Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you today for this time we've shared and for the chance we have to be in your presence and to hear your voice. We pray that you would help us to pray. Each day, every day, throughout the day. There's no wrong time to pray. There's no wrong way to pray. Help us to pray. Help us to begin those conversations. To talk and to listen. Thanks for waiting every day. Amen.