A Life of Prayer: The Cynic Memory Verse: Ephesians 3:20

Nov. 17th, 2024 Scripture Reading: Psalm 23

**SLIDE 1**

Last week we began a series called “A Life of Prayer” and we discussed the fact that we come before our heavenly Father as his children. And children are not so good at communicating. But instead of trying to distance ourselves from our childlike status, we saw that as we grow in spiritual maturity, we become more and more dependent on God. Our need for prayer becomes greater, not less.

 But, as tends to happen in the human life cycle, as we grow up we begin to shed our innocence. As we learn more about the way the world works we tend to grow a little jaded. Before too long the Child becomes the Cynic.

 Cynicism is defined thusly:

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 “A general distrust of people’s motives and actions.” Cynics may lack faith in people’s ability to achieve goals. Our childlike faith becomes cynical when we begin to apply this lack of faith to God’s abilities, to God’s motives and actions.

**SLIDE 3**

 As you know my wife is currently pregnant with our eighth child, her sixth pregnancy. She takes on the role of expectant mother quite well. I would imagine it is rather challenging to have your body literally house another body. Adding to that challenge is something called gestational diabetes. For whatever reason, while pregnant, Tracy’s body cannot properly handle sugars. So she needs to take a certain amount of insulin and she must consistently monitor her levels. Tracy has dealt with this with all of her pregnancies, though with her first it was undiagnosed. Now, as a couple we are thankful to God for her health. The process of growing a child is fraught with dangers and risk factors…gestational diabetes is a bit of a snag, but, thank God, certainly not a life threatening condition. Be that as it may, as the husband, I boldy made my requests known to God. I prayed, and still pray, for God to heal my wife of this condition, that of all the things on her plate, this would not be one of them. That her body would be restored, that she would be able to process sugar normally.

 Here she is today, still pregnant, still relatively healthy, but still dealing with diabetes. What can I conclude but that God has not answered my prayer? Why not? I believe he loves me, he loves Tracy, and this baby. I believe he is all-powerful. It’s nothing for him to snap his fingers and take care of this problem. I also believe there should be a sort of “buy five get the sixth free” kind of policy. God could make this sixth pregnancy the easiest one yet. So what gives?

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 Well, I don’t know what gives. But in making my same request over and over again is easy to allow cynicism to start to color my steadfast faith. Asking God to heal my wife was much easier when we first found out about her pregnancy. Now, the request comes a little half-heartedly. It seems like God has made up his mind. It seems he has denied my request….What gives? Maybe prayer is not all that I thought it was. And as I walk down that cynical road, I begin to question God’s goodness acting on my behalf. In that questioning, I take a step away from God.

**SLIDE 5**

 Paul E. Miller writes, “To be cynical is to be distant.” “(Cynicism) protects you from crushing disappointment, but it paralyzes you from doing anything. Cynicism kills hope…prayer feels pointless.” I think we have all been there. I know I have certainly prayed prayers out of a sense of duty and not with a heart full of faith. I have gone through the motions before. But if we take a moment, we can recognize there is a particular wonder **SLIDE 6** that comes from talking to the all powerful God of the universe. A certain magic if you will. Do you remember when you believed in magic? When you could watch a magician work and not think about the routine or trying to uncover the secrets of how they did something. A child focuses on the magic, a cynic focuses on the trick. Now I realize a miracle from the hand of God is a far cry from a magician’s skill, but when it comes to my prayers, am I focused on awe and wonder, the magic? Or am I focused on trying to figure out how this all works, trying to uncover the trick behind it all? Trying to get all my questions answered. And in this scrutiny, I miss the delight, the joy that is prayer.

 So what do we do with this creeping cynicism? How can we recover a child-like spirit once we have become an adult who knows too much and doesn’t believe in magic anymore?

 Take a look at one of the best loved sections of the Bible, Psalm 23.

**SLIDE 7**

 It begins with the famous words, “The Lord is my shepherd.” If the Lord is my shepherd, what does that make me? A sheep!

**SLIDE 8**

What is a sheep capable of? Nothing! They can eat from the meadow they are in but if food runs out, they do not know enough to go on into the next area. They do not understand the notion of gravity or of pits or of falling, so they end up trapped in places they cannot get out of. They have no means of protecting themselves from any sort of predator. They can’t run fast, they can’t jump high and they can’t find their way out of an empty bucket!

**SLIDE 9**

And this is the creature we are compared to in the bible…

 But here is the strength of the sheep…it doesn’t know better. It is not paying attention to the pitfall and the dangers and the wild animals that surround it. The sheep pays attention to the shepherd. Jesus affirms this wonderful comparison when he says in John 10, **SLIDE 10**

“I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” Later in that same chapter he says, “My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me.” The sheep are focused on the shepherd. The sheep know the shepherd and notice what the means…because they know the shepherd, they then follow the shepherd. Despite the circumstances of their surroundings. Despite the thinning grass, despite the prowling wolves, despite the rocky crags, despite a diagnosis of diabetes, the sheep follow the shepherd. Jesus goes on in verse 28,

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 “I will give my sheep eternal life. They will never die, and no one will snatch them from my hand.” What better words could a helpless sheep ever hope to hear? The shepherd gives eternal life, all we have to do is stick with the shepherd; nothing and no one will snatch us from his hand.

 The strength of the sheep is that it dosen’t know any better. It focuses on the shepherd. So as I pray for some thing impossible, like for my wife’s diabetes to be taken away, I hear the voice of the cynic in my head that says, “You know, this is a medical condition. It is not just going to go away. That is not how these things work. Just listen to the doctors who have studied all this. Take the medication they provide and stop with this nonsensical magical thinking.”

**SLIDE 12**

The Cynic knows better. He claims to know how these things work. He proclaims his trust in medical science alone. And “alone” is the key word there. The world of medicine has exploded in it’s scope and grandeur and it will continue to do so. Praise God, we can put an end to certain conditions and curb the effects of others. Praise God for his provision of such blessings. A sheep will take advantage of such blessings, but knows true life, eternal life is not found in the doctor’s orders; it comes from the Shepherd. **SLIDE 13**

 The strength of the sheep is that it doesn’t know any better. The Cynical voice can go on about this and that, about statisitacs and probablilities and impossibilities, but the sheep just doesn’t know any better. With it’s eyes on the shepherd the sheep will make his impossible requests known.

 The sheep knows it’s need; the cynic on the other hand, doesn’t need anybody. If we go back to Psalm 23 we see an in depth description of what the Good Shepherd does for the sheep.

**SLIDE 14**

 Paul Miller observes what happens if we take away this shepherd. What is left for the sheep on it’s own? Look at verse 1, if the Lord were not my shepherd, I would be in want. I would not lie down, I would not be restored. I would still walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but without the shepherd I would fear evil. I would not be comforted, **SLIDE 15** I would not have a table prepared for me, or be anointed. Goodness and love would not follow me…I would just have days of my life. And where would I dwell if it were not for the good Shepherd?

 This child-like need helps quell the sardonic tone of the cynic’s voice. We don’t need to know better, we need to trust better. Along with this child like spirit comes a sense of gratitude. Even when my prayer is not answered when I want or how I want, with my eyes on the shepherd, I can live in thankfulness anyway. I know him and he knows me. I’ve learned to hear his voice and follow.

 Sheep cannot be cynical…sheep simply do not know enough. But one of the ways we invite cynicism to come and make it’s home in our hearts is with our attitude toward prayer.

**SLIDE 16**

 Now, this attitude may not be expressed by us in words but it is a mode of thinking we can easily adopt without our ever needing to consciously admit to it. It goes like this: “Expect nothing. Then if something good happens, be thankful.” This is the cynics mantra, because through this philosophy we remove ourselves from the process. We become a bystander. Instead of living life with the shepherd, we choose instead to sit on the sidelines and shout out to the shepherd our own advice, since we know so much.

**SLIDE 17**

Expect nothing. This is simply a numbing device that tries to keep us from disappointment. To expect nothing is to remove ourselves from life, to try to insulate ourselves from any sort of pain. Wasn’t it the man in black from the Princess Bride who said “Life is pain…”? If we don’t want to experience pain, we better not bother to get out of bed. And if we don’t want to expect anything, we better stay away from prayer.

Expect nothing, then *if* something good happens, be thankful.” If?

**SLIDE 18**

 If is a word of happenstance, “If” is an open question. As Christians, we do not live in the world of “if.” If something good happens to occur, it is good to be thankful, but again, we are not involved in that equation in any way. Our lack of expectation smothers any gratitude. Are we supposed to be thankful to the universe? How can we really thank God if we don’t expect anything from Him? But we have a solution to this cynicism…child-like prayer.

**SLIDE 19**

 Prayer awakens expectation. This is the whole basis for our PAX teams here at Forest Hills. We need to be an expectant people, people who are open to life, the pains and the victories. We are here as followers of Jesus to fully engage, not only in our own life but also in the lives of those around us. We don’t numb ourselves against disappointment and just wait around for the “ifs” to happen. We as sheep follow our shepherd. We as children come before our heavenly Father. We carry on expecting great and impossible things, and when the answer turns out to be no, when the cancer persists, when the loved one passes, when the plan doesn’t work out, when the wife is still diabetic…what do we do with the pain of disappointment? What do we do when our high hopes crash?

This is a question for another sermon…next week’s in fact. When reality does not match our hope we have stepped into the wilderness. And the wilderness is not a fun place to be, but I promise you, in that dry and weary land, if we stick with the shepherd, we will find life and find it abundantly.

So let us step up together and allow prayer to awaken in us expectation.

**SLIDE 20**

What does God what to do in your life? What does God want to do in this church? What does God want to do in Forest Lake? I close with a plea to engage in prayer with your brothers and sisters, be involved with a PAX team and live in expectation. I close with a word from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians chapter three verse twenty:

**SLIDE 21**

“Glory to God, who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by his power at work within us.” Amen.