

Tuesday Morning Devotions, October 28, 2008
Eastern Washington/Idaho Synod Bishop's Convocation
"Pastor As Missionary"

***"Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the Word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should."* (Colossians 4:2-4)**

In my office, right above my computer, I have two shelves filled with books on outreach that I have accumulated over the years, so in preparing for this devotion I thought it might be worth giving them another look to see if any ideas jumped out at me and primed the pump. That was an interesting exercise! Some of the books are definitely showing their age – like the ones on how to reach the new, young Baby-boomer generation. Some of them are fluffier than I remember. Some are more theoretical. And some have really good ideas that, frankly, I had forgotten were in there. But as I looked through these books, what jumped out at me was not something *in* them. Rather, it was something conspicuously absent. There was little or nothing on the role of prayer in outreach.

Now, that surprised me. Maybe the authors just took it for granted. Of course prayer should be part of the mix! But even if that was the case, what a contrast to the attitude of the early church! For them, prayer was not just part of the mix; it was essential, indispensable. Paging through the book of Acts, this comes through loud and clear. In the very first chapter, what was the disciples' primary preparation for Pentecost? **Devoting themselves to prayer.** And in the chapters that follow, think how many key breakthroughs were connected with people **devoting themselves prayer.** Sure, at times even they didn't always recognize prayer's full potential. My favorite example is in Acts 12, where folks were praying and praying for Peter's release from prison, yet when he actually showed up at the door they refused to believe it! Still, that's the exception that proves the rule. Prayer was essential to the early church's outreach, as it was to every other part of their ministry. And far from taking it for granted, again and again we hear a missionary pastor named Paul pleading for prayer support. The example in our text is just one of many: *"Pray for us...that God will open to us a door for the Word..."*

In many respects, the challenges we face in outreach today are very much like those the early church faced. Cross-cultural, counter-cultural, theologically divided, financially strapped – that was them; that is us. Yet back then, they not only survived, they thrived. More to the point, their outreach thrived. And they didn't have two shelves full of books on outreach. They didn't have the latest field-tested programs to use. They didn't have experts and seminars to show them how to do the job most effectively. Imagine! But what they did have was prayer. They relied heavily on prayer. And I don't think we can write off the results as mere coincidence! Every pastor here knows the value of prayer in

teaching, preaching, and preparation. Every pastor here knows the value of prayer in ministry with the sick. Every pastor here knows the value of prayer in crisis situations, parish planning, even the budgeting process – *especially* the budgeting process! So with this Convocation spotlighting the “*pastor as missionary*,” it just makes sense to apply what we know to outreach as well, and supplement all those handy-dandy programs and “how-to” manuals with a good, solid, pastoral emphasis on prayer.

Think of the advantages of us being the ones to do that in our congregations! For starters, *we’re not likely to face any opposition*. That in itself is huge! I can’t imagine even the most negative member rolling their eyes and muttering under their breath, “*Good grief! Pastor’s pushing another outreach gimmick on us: prayer!*” To the contrary, our folks value prayer. To some degree or another, they feel comfortable with prayer. And if there is one area where many feel a desire to grow, it’s in prayer. In a way, this is kind of a “pastoral two-fer.” We get to nurture our folks’ prayer life as a whole, *plus* we get to encourage that prayer life to focus on people and needs beyond our walls.

And as that focus takes root, who knows where it might lead next? Can you pray and pray and pray for a person without God kindling a special tenderness for them in your heart, maybe even moving you to find further ways to help? Usually not. So when we link together prayer and outreach – when we pray and pray and pray in connection with outreach -- couldn’t we expect God to kindle something similar in hearts and minds? I believe so. After all, prayer doesn’t just work in one direction. When *we* open up to God in prayer...well, we open up *to God* in prayer – we open up to the Spirit’s direction, open up to the Spirit’s working, open up to the Spirit’s power – which, of course, is essential for any kind of effective outreach.

In fact, that’s another advantage of us being the ones to link prayer and outreach in our congregations. Pastorally, it will *put the theological focus where it belongs: on outreach being primarily the Spirit’s work*. You know, all too often discussions of outreach focus on what *we* do – or what we *should* do. *If we just did this, if we just did that, if we just adopted this method, this program, this approach, how much more effective outreach might be.* You would think that outreach was primarily our job, and the Holy Spirit merely hung around to help us out!

But isn’t our theology just the opposite? Doesn’t Scripture teach, “*No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit?*” And doesn’t our Catechism underscore this truth: “*I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in my Lord Jesus or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel...*” The Holy Spirit has enlightened me! The Holy Spirit has sanctified me! The Holy Spirit! Far from outreach being our job with some assistance from the Spirit, actually outreach is the Holy Spirit’s job with some assistance from us. And a good, solid, pastoral emphasis on prayer in our outreach will keep this truth in focus! Whatever *we* might be able to do – share the Word, clear up

misunderstandings, witness through service, clear away obstacles; whatever we might be able to do, the fact remains: *any positive results are up to the Holy Spirit*. And prayer keeps us mindful of that. Prayer keeps us in sync with that. Prayer opens us up to the Spirit, keeps us dependent on the Spirit, and puts us at the Spirit's disposal, the way it's supposed to be instead of the other way around. And that kind of theological honesty – about Who's really the main worker in outreach, Who's really in charge of results – well, that can only benefit outreach...and our congregations' feelings about outreach.

...Which, I would suggest, might be yet another advantage to this linking outreach and prayer: how it could brighten up our congregations' feelings about outreach. Think about it this way. Many Lutherans shy away from outreach because they feel overwhelmed by what they cannot do, yet being Lutherans, they also feel guilty about shying away from outreach, because they know they should do it, and they feel ashamed that what little they do doesn't achieve better results. Now, talk about pressure! Talk about lose/lose! Small wonder we have a hard time getting people excited about outreach! But what if... What if it should really sink in that results are up to the Holy Spirit? What happens then to the pressure? Or judging ourselves by results? [*sound of an air leak*] That should bring them way down! And what if it should really sink in that our job is to assist the Spirit? Where's our focus likely to shift? Maybe...onto assisting? Maybe...onto doing the things we can do? And how's that likely to affect our feelings about outreach? Give us a little more confidence? Give us a little more satisfaction? Maybe! Especially when it sinks in that a really important thing we can do is **devote ourselves to prayer**.

You know, I have never seen a really prayerful church that was a discouraged church. I have never seen a really prayerful church that wasn't also a confident church – even if their outreach results were something less than stellar. Because the more people devote themselves to prayer, the more they recognize the value of what they're doing. Their intercession is not just pious mouthing of words. It's standing in the breach for people. It's claiming divine promises for people. It's bringing people we care about into the presence of the living God and seeking paths for the Spirit to touch them. That's vital work indeed! And if we don't let ourselves get rattled by lack of immediate results; if we're willing to do what we can, **devote ourselves to prayer**, and trust the Spirit to take care of the results, this linking of prayer with outreach can be very satisfying ministry!

What's more, in terms of results, it's bound to be more effective in the long-run. Ironic, huh? But that should not surprise us. I mean, as we look through Acts and the letters of Paul, we see no emphasis on getting numbers, getting results, just on doing what you can and especially praying. Yet, look at the results! Over and over, we read how the Spirit added so-and-so many to the church; how the Spirit multiplied the number being reached. Yes, the Spirit! The Spirit did the work, while the church did what it could to assist...not the least of which was praying – in fact, **devoting themselves to prayer**.

I love what John Bunyan once said, "*You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.*" That's especially true for outreach, and I think that's an especially helpful emphasis for congregational life. As "missionary pastors," we may have a soft-spot for a particular kind of outreach; we may have a particular program or method we really think is great. Or not. But any kind of outreach will become better, any congregation will become stronger, when we take our cue from a wise old missionary pastor named Paul, who wrote, "**Devote yourselves to prayer.**"