

“POWER TO TRUST – CONNECTIONS”

By BILL VAMOS

Scripture Reading: John 15:1-17 (Good News Bible)

Prayer:

O Come, Holy Spirit.
Come as the fire and burn;
Come as the wind and cleanse;
Come as the light and reveal;
Come as the water and refresh.
Convict!
Convert!
Consecrate us.
Until we are wholly Yours. Amen!

I'm going to begin this sermon by sharing with you some of my favorite prayers. They come from the book, Children's Letters to God, compiled by Eric Marshall and Stuart Hample.

Dear God,
If you so all these things you are pretty busy. Now here's my question. When is the best time I can talk to you. I know you are always listening but when will you be listening hard in Troy, New York?

Sincerely yours, Allen

Dear God,
I am the only one in my class who is Chinese. They all say that you are American but, I am too, so you could be Chinese right? Your friend, Kim

Dear God,
My little brother is four years old. I wish you could please get him to stop driving me crazy. Your friend, Mark, Age 7 _

Dear God,
How do you feel about people who don't believe in You? Somebody else wants to know.
A friend, Neil

Dear God, What is it like when you die? Nobody will tell me. I just want to know. I don't want to do it.

Sincerely, Mike

Those prayers can help us because they reveal uninhibited trust. Jesus shows us how we can learn to have a similar trust in Him, in His teaching as recorded in the Gospel of John, the 15th chapter, verses 1-17. I'm going to try to summarize His meaning in those

verses, in one sentence: Christ will give us power to trust Him, and to bear fruit that feeds others and ourselves, as we stay connected with Him.

I've heard it said that Jesus was able to love and heal, and even die for people, because He "had connections" with the Almighty. It's true, isn't it? While Jesus lived on earth, He had at least two special connections into heaven. When we focus on His connections, they seem rather commonplace; everyday realities which are actually available to us. One of Jesus' connections was people. And another was prayer.

Have you ever thought about how often Jesus connected with God through other people?

Peter and James and John were Jesus' companions during the very moments of His Transfiguration. They also stood with Jesus, as He raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. And He invited those same three people to stay nearby as He prayed in Gethsemane, before His death.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, He maintained a close relationship with His disciples. They sometimes had trouble understanding what Jesus said, and did, and they let Him down when He needed them most, but, somehow, Jesus looked beyond all that. He even called them His friends.

Sometimes, the only way we can know Christ Jesus as our friend is through other people, who become living connections, with Him for us.

A church in my community has a Singles Group in which the participants share, pray, and discuss ways of coping with their particular sufferings, and they also support one another in the many household tasks which become so heavy when a person has to do them all alone. A house-painter trims windows for a person which in turn cooks several meals for the painter to eat throughout the week. A retired person cares for the child of a single parent, and the parent repairs the retired persons' car. And so on.

Christian spirituality does not consist of pre-fabricated meditations designed to conjure up an eerie, unearthly god. Sometimes, the Lord comes to us in visions and dreams, but, always, their purpose is to develop our relationship with god, who is spending every second of God's time, loving people. It may be that your most spiritual activity is supporting, or being supported by other people.

Christian spirituality includes the grace of God enabling us to realize that we are connected, with each other, and, through that connection our friend, Christ Jesus comes to us.

In John's Gospel, Chapter 15, Jesus says, "I am the real vine. My Father is the gardener. You are the branches. (and) you are my friends."

Christ Jesus connects us with Himself through people. And He also connects us through prayer. Prayer is the other special connection which Jesus had.

Someone has suggested that Christ Jesus would not be called to be pastor of any of our churches today because He was always wandering off the job for a few days alone with God. Listen to some examples of the way in which the Scriptures describe Jesus' prayer life:

After saying good-bye to the people, He went away to a hill to pray. (Mark 6:46)

And after He dismissed the crowds, He went up on the mountain Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone. (Matthew 14:23)

In these days He went out to the mountain to pray; and all night He continued in Prayer to God. And when it was day, He called His disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom He names apostles...A great multitude of people...came to hear Him...And all the crowd sought to touch Him, for power came forth from Him and healed them all." (Luke 6:12, 13,17,19)

Jesus stayed close to God through prayer, and that same connection is available to us.

There are times in our lives when we realize that we need to make prayer a regular part of our living, when we see clearly that only God is adequate to our needs, and that the only totally dependable relationship we have is our relationship with God. I'm going to share a personal experience in which prayer enabled me to trust in God's reliability.

Some time ago, my family and I moved from Elkhart, IN, where I had pastored The First Presbyterian Church for 10 years, to Lafayette, IN, where I was to design, and develop the Center for Christian Growth.

During the first year of pioneering the Center the results exceeded my hopes. I found that the need for a ministry of total person growth in Christ is greater than I had envisioned, and there were people who wanted to be part of a team in carrying out that ministry. But the only accurate way I can describe the other areas of my life during that year, is to call them a combination of disaster and trauma.

Our youngest daughter, Susan, moved from one Junior High School to another, and there was loneliness for her, and our son Jeff, let, 6 months after our move, to begin his freshman year in college, and that made our family 2/3 of an empty nest. Our daughter, Becky, who at the time was 21 years old, was completing her sophomore year at Hanover College. Becky discovered, during this year of transition for our family, that she had what her doctor diagnosed as a connective tissue disease called Lupus.

Meanwhile, my spouse, Josephine, or Jo as she likes to be called, was feeling a consistent sense of loss over all the friends and challenging activities she had left behind in Elkhart, for her husband's "sacred calling," which to her was also a crazy dream. Our marriage bent and strained throughout this time, but, thank God, it did not break. And now it is

stronger than ever and Jo is using her gifts in some exciting new challenges for her and has mad many new friends. Add to this fact that my father had died only 8 months before we moved. We changed from suburban living to life in a 115 year old farm house. We had to wait 12 months to sell our house in Elkhart. You can begin to se the picture.

I would characterize our experience as not simply a testing of faith, it was like a whole series of final exams, coming day after day after day. The question was not: “Is there a crisis?” But: “Is there a new crisis today?”

Somehow, in the midst of all the upheaval of those twelve months, I maintained a steady resilience. I kept telling myself that somebody had to keep his head above water to hold the rest of the family together. And I managed to do that. But, as soon as the constant turbulence began to subside, and we started to live under less stressful circumstances, I began to let down my defenses. I started to experience a grief reaction.

I began to miss the Elkhart people and my preaching and pastoral work. (There were of course some things I didn’t miss at all, but, we won’t talk about that.) I also began to realize just how angry I was at God for allowing the Vamos family to walk through such a valley of deep darkness.

I’m telling you all of this because it was my regular discipline of praying in solitude that enabled me to keep my life in focus. Yes, I shared my burden with others. I talked with a trusted friend on a regular basis. I participated in a prayer and support group. But I also brought my honest feelings to God-in-Christ while I was alone, in prayer. As Jesus promises in John 15, He remained in me. Of course, sometimes my prayers were filled with doubt and distress rather that trust. I remember reading a prayer by Charles deFoucauld, otherwise known as Brother Charles of Jesus. It’s called the Prayer of Abandonment. I mention it because I recall how much I wished I could pray that prayer when I read it, and how utterly impossible it was for me to sincerely express one word of it. Listen to a portion of that prayer:

Prayer of Abandonment

“Father,
I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you;

After I admitted to God that there was no way I could pray that prayer and be honest, I wrote a prayer of my own that was authentic for me. Let me share the Prayer of Possessiveness by Brother William.

Prayer of Possessiveness

To Whom it may concern: alias God.
I keep myself because I am all I really have.
Give me what I want; I know me best.

I will thank you when you make things go my way.
I'm ready for excitement, success, and just a little failure.
Let your will be done in me when I can feel good about it.
Let other people be obedient always.
For I deserve lots of good things from you.
After all, I've sacrificed a lot for you,
and you've only come through for me periodically.
In fact, much of the time you've been a major disappointment.
I think you need to shore up your quality control department.
When you come through, there's no one better.
But let me tell you, you're inconsistent and unpredictable.
No, I'd like to love you, but right now, I have to be convinced.
So, I want to keep myself.
I have real reservations about you today.
And only a confidence that fears recession in face of inflationary risks...
Yes, God, you are still my favorite god,
but I am a dissatisfied creature and a disgruntled servant....
and very hopeful.
(By Brother William, in transition.)

Praying that prayer became for me a step of freedom. God did not zap me with a bolt of lightening. God kept on being, in Jesus Christ, the real vine, even though I was a branch that was ready to cut myself off of the vine and go plant my own vineyard someplace.

But I had made a promise to one of my most trusted friends to stay with a daily personal discipline of prayer. I had voluntarily decided to meet with my friend on a regular basis, and report on how well I was doing in the fulfillment of that promise. So, I continued my personal prayer discipline, even though I encountered some additional feelings of struggle and doubt with myself.

Then, during one week, my "inner eyes," as Paul calls them in Ephesians 1:18, began to see and to perceive what God-in-Christ had been doing in me.

Jesus' words in John 15:1 and 5 reached into me and I heard them as though it were for the first time: "I am the real vine. My Father is the gardener,...you are one of the branches."

One day that week, I wrote the following prayer. "Thank you, Lord, for letting me tell you of my non-trust in you.

"In those moments when I felt so desperate over the many unexpected set-backs in my mid-life risk, you did not give me a 'snappy instant-fix-it' answer. You did the opposite. You emptied me of everything but your love and your presence, and then you took from me my awareness of You and Your love. You did it on purpose, didn't You? You purposely kept on loving me in ways that I would Not feel so that my trust would be in You and not in my feelings.

“Lord God, by your Son Jesus and through your Holy Spirit, write this lesson on my soul. The center of life is You. Not the Center for Christian Growth and my ministry. Not me and how I fell. Not the happy or sad, crushing or lifting experiences in life. The center is You alone. You and Your love for me and, for everyone else, in Christ Jesus. “Please through the death-resurrection experiences, which have been happening to me, cause me to die to myself-dependency and egotism so that you may live in me.”

In that prayer I experienced something of what Jesus meant when He said, as recorded in John 15:11: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” It was a breakthrough that enabled me to see my struggle in prayer as a means of growing in my relationship with God and with myself, and with the members of my family, with whom I had experienced such an unwanted season of suffering.

Jesus said, “I am the real vine...My Father is the gardener. You are the branches (and) you are my friends...”

Christian spirituality is God in Christ transforming and strengthening us through prayer, and, supporting and challenging us through people.

If you are already a praying person, you may want to ask God to enable you to be more consistently open to people. In time you may discover that you are more at home with others that you ever dreamed you would be. Challenge yourself to grow by reaching out to new people in your church, and people whom you do not know. Although that outreach may not be easy for you, let it be your step of spiritual growth.

On the other hand, if you are primarily a people-person, ask God to help you initiate, or deepen your prayer life. Start with five to ten minutes daily, and include a book of Biblical devotions, such as the Presbyterian bi-monthly booklet entitled These Days.

If you feel you want or need help in disciplining yourself, ask God to lead you to a person whom you trust enough to ask him or her to hold you accountable for your daily prayer time. Meet with that person every two to three weeks, and voluntarily account for how well you are doing with your 5-10 minutes of daily personal prayer, asking for support, gentleness, and to be challenged, and add to your daily prayer time when five to ten minutes is not long enough for you. Perhaps the Church can help you develop such prayer partnerships through the church program in some way.

You and I have connections with God, just as Jesus had, and, through these connections we receive power to trust God and power to bear fruit that feeds others and ourselves.

Jesus said, “I am the real vine...My Father is the gardener. You are the branches...(and) you are my friends.”

Jesus says something similar in Matthew 11:28-30. Listen to His words, as they are translated by Clarence Jordan.

“Come to me all of you who are frustrated and have had a bellyful and I will give you zest. Get in the harness with me and let me teach you, for I am trained and have a cooperative spirit and you will find zest for your lives. For my harness is practical and my assignment is joyful.”

This is an offer you can hardly turn down. Amen