

Remember: Prayers
By Pastor Jay Henderson
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Revelation 8:1-5

Good morning, Asbury! It's a real honor to be up here today. Because – as you may have heard mentioned, at Annual Conference this week, I was officially ordained as an Elder in the United Methodist Church. I know many of you may not be completely up to speed on the intricacies of our denominational organization and structure. But the short story is that this was a big deal.

In our church tradition, we hold the ministry of the ordained in high esteem. And whereas I think it is a good thing that – at the very least – we seem to take this very seriously...I wonder if sometimes, as a result of how arduous we make the ordination process, I wonder if we aggrandize the position of the pastor, while diminishing the power of “all y'all” – the laity?

When we ordain someone in the United Methodist Church, we have a long list of questions we ask. But it might surprise you to know that those **used to be** the questions that were asked of **every single person** who wanted to be a Methodist. Now we reserve it for just the clergy. Like the church should only expect clergy to be committed Christians – you know, because it's too difficult for everyone else.

In our quest to make the church accessible, have we offered a cheap substitute for holy living? Church lite? All the feels – none of the commitment? Pastor Guy mentioned Deitrich Bonhoeffer in his sermon last week. Bonhoeffer was a German theologian who worked against Hitler in Nazi Germany. And he talked about an idea he called “Cheap Grace” in his book *The Cost Of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer wrote:

“Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace. ...Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” I might add that Bonhoeffer was martyred for his faith.

At Asbury – we don't want to peddle cheap grace. Which is why we're starting up this sermon series today: **Remember**. When we ask a person to become a member of the church, we ask them “Will you be loyal to Jesus Christ as expressed by Asbury UMC, and will you uphold the church through your prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness?”

Everyone is welcome in our church. But when we make a covenant to **be the church**, we commit to some very important things. And today, we start it all with perhaps the most important: **PRAYER. [READ Revelation 8:1-5, pg. 1223].**

The book of Revelation is a very interesting thing. It intimidates a lot of people – because it's filled with all kinds of strange images and visions. We won't get into all of that today, but I do want to talk about this series of visions going on here. We've got this scroll that has some important information on it. And it has 7 different wax seals that have to be opened in order to read this important document. **Spoiler alert** – what the scroll contains is the full understanding, or “revelation” of God's ultimate plan for creation and its redemption.

But before anyone can read this scroll, they have to open the seals. As each seal is opened, another element of God's magnificent power is revealed. And after *all* the other seals are opened,

we finally get to the last one – the seventh. The culmination and greatest element of God’s power revealed on the earth. And after the 7th seal is opened – what happens? Silence. Absolute silence. All heaven is waiting with bated breath for about a half an hour – knowing something unbelievable is about to happen.

And here’s what we find out: All of the prayers of Christians are like a fragrant offering burned in front of the Lord. All the prayers are making their way up into heaven to God. And what happens is God gathers up all those prayers. Then he bottles them up. And he charges them up with his unbelievable power – super charges them – and then hurtles them back to the earth.

All the church’s prayers, when charged with the power of God, when they return to the earth - they come down like a blaze of fire, and lightning and they shake the ground like an earthquake. This isn’t describing God’s wrath, but the magnitude of his power. ***God’s greatest strength unleashed on the earth comes through the prayers of his church, and God imparts his authority and then hurtles them back to the earth to accomplish his will. Woah.***

If you had any doubts about little old you, and the role you play in the cosmic story – then chew on that. God, for whatever reason, has chosen to incorporate us into the divine plan of redemption for the world. We get to cooperate and participate with God in redeeming this earth.

It actually makes a lot of sense when you think about it. It’s like a parent – who *could do* all the chores for the kids on her own. And it might be easier and quicker to do so. But you’ve got to train the kids to grow up. To be responsible. And develop a sense of pride and ownership in helping the family. And so you patiently work with the kids until they learn to do the chores. That’s partly why God has us pray for what we need. God is 1) incorporating us into a relationship with Him, and 2) It helps us take ownership for *enacting* God’s will on Earth. God hears our prayers, and puts some legs on them.

I don’t know why it’s such a difficult thing for us. I’m just as guilty as anyone. I feel like I’m so busy, that I couldn’t possibly spare a few moments to spend in intentional prayer. And then I’ll go binge watch a three hour COPS marathon on TV.

Look, here’s an image I had. It’s like we’re trying to cut down a Redwood tree. And right next to me, I have a huge logging truck that is able to do it in nothing flat. But rather than taking a moment to get in the truck, fire up the engine, and then cut the tree down in just a moment – instead I run off and take my swiss army knife and chop away at it until I’m exhausted. That’s what we’re doing when we try to serve the Lord without praying. Maybe the intention is good – but we’ll burn ourselves out. It’s hard to know what God wants when you don’t talk to God.

When we look at our scripture today, what we’re specifically talking about are prayers directed towards the establishment of God’s kingdom on the earth. It breaks my heart that probably only 1% of the prayer requests we receive are directed towards helping spread the gospel into the world. It’s good to pray for people in the hospital – don’t misunderstand me. But where are the prayers for broken souls? Where are the prayers for the poor? Where are the prayers for dramatic changes in our community or our nation towards the gospel? Where are the prayers for our brothers and sisters in other nations who are being martyred for their faith? And where are the prayers for our enemies and those who persecute us – heaven forbid?

We get to cooperate and participate in ***God’s divine plan of redemption***. Jesus even taught us to pray, “Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done.”

As Christians, we have an amazing heritage. Some 2,000 years ago a small handful of ordinary people (mostly fishermen, carpenters and manual laborers), empowered by the Holy

Spirit, established this fascinating entity known as the church. In the subsequent 2,000 years many people have sacrificed everything to ensure that the church would continue, so that each generation would know who Christ is, what he has done, what he wants us to do now, and what he will do in the future.

And all the great figures – EVERY SINGLE ONE – in the history of the church — have all insisted on the importance of prayer. What did the Apostles do when they needed guidance? **Prayer and fasting.** What did John Wesley say about it? **"God does nothing except in response to believing prayer."** Martin Luther said, **"I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer."** E.M. Bounds, another famous theologian: **"No learning can make up for the failure to pray. No earnestness, no diligence, no study, no gifts will supply its lack."** 10 out of 10 of God's most amazing disciples say PRAYER IS AN ABSOLUTE NECESSITY.

I want to close by telling you about another one of God's most special servants who taught me about prayer. You won't know her name – but it's Miss Essie P. Cowan. Let me tell you about Miss Essie. Sweet lady. African-American woman who had grown up in the Jim Crow era South. She was a widow. Her husband retired as a 1SG in the Army, and so she felt most at home worshipping at the Chapel at Ft. Rucker where I went to flight school. Jamye and I were heading up the praise band there at the time. And one day, before the service, Miss Essie came up to me and said, "Jaaay – I was praying to the Lawd, and he told me – you're going to be an *amazing* preacher." Well, thank you Miss Essie, but I don't know about that.

That's when she looked at me and said, "I don't think you *heard* me. I said, I prayed to the Lawd, and He told me you're going to be a preacher." "Well. Ok. Thank you Miss Essie." And so we went on with the service. In the middle of the sermon that day, the Chaplain, Randy Kirby, a very Spirit-filled man, stops. He stops in the middle of his sermon and says, "I have to stop right now, because the Holy Spirit is telling me something. He's telling me that one of you in this room is called to ministry. And you're trying to run from it. You need to stop running and submit to the Lord." How could I deny this call? I wouldn't be up here preaching today, I wouldn't have been ordained this week, if Miss Essie hadn't been "praying to the Lawd."

Your prayers mean so much. And they have so much power. If only we would just humble ourselves and pray – by God's power, we could change the world. God's yearning for us to grow up – and to allow ourselves to be incorporated into His divine plan of redemption for the world through our prayers.

In a moment – we're going to partake of communion. And when we do – as you come forward to the altar, I want you to pray for three things. Let's start our Kingdom oriented prayers with these three things: **1) Pray for an enemy, or someone who has hurt you. 2) Pray for a specific person you know who is not yet a Christian, that they might know Christ. 3) Offer your life to going and doing whatever God calls you to in order to further the Kingdom.**

If we can pray those three prayers today and every day, I think we'll be well on our way to seeing some of God's magnificent power hurtled back towards the earth for the building up of the Kingdom of God.

PRAYER – O God of all times and places. We pray for your Church, which is set today amid the perplexities of a changing order, and face to face with new tasks. Baptize her afresh in the life-giving spirit of Jesus. Bestow upon her a great responsiveness to duty, a swifter compassion with suffering, and an utter loyalty to your will. Help her to proclaim boldly the coming of your kingdom. Put upon her lips the ancient gospel of her Lord. Fill her with the prophets' scorn of

tyranny, and with a Christlike tenderness for the heavy-laden and downtrodden. Bid her cease from seeking her own life, lest she lose it. Make her valiant to give up her life to humanity, that, like her crucified Lord, she may mount by the path of the cross to a higher glory; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.