

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we come to your house today to worship. Indeed, you are worthy of our worship, our wonder, our amazement at all the works of your hands. Each day is crafted by you to bring new life into our lives and our world. Indeed, this is a new day and a new opportunity for living and breathing in the transforming power of your Holy Spirit. We welcome the Spirit in new ways among us today and ask that we be receptive to its power and its calling, in ways that we seek and ways that may surprise us. In this time, we seek you in prayer to be conformed to your will and your love for us and all creation. We hold in our hearts places of brokenness, like the recent attacks in Paris, France and places of unrest around the world. We pray for those who suffer from internal brokenness, from mental or physical illness, that they may find the support and community they need to flourish. Hear our prayer, Holy God, and move us to be your faithful people.

Holy One, you are the source of everything; we seek to commit the work of our hands to your cause. After all, God, without you behind it, every matter we attend to has little meaning. Our work may seem like it is accomplishing much, but in the grand scheme of things, we do little when we do not move with the power of the Holy Spirit as our energy. Walk with us, God, in our joy and our struggle, to serve you devotedly but ultimately to acknowledge you in the paths we walk toward faithfulness. We pray all these things in the name of the one who gives us strength, wisdom, and joy in the journey, our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray as one people...

SERMON

When I was in Houston, I saw many incredible things in such a small amount of time. We went to the fastest growing United Methodist Church in the Nation, called FaithBridge.

It began in a living room 17 years ago as a prayer meeting among friends. Now, it serves thousands every Sunday Morning and beyond. We went to Windsor Village United Methodist, which was a dying congregation in the 1970s before captured by a vision that included taking care of the lowest members of society. They now have fostered a non-profit organization and continue to grow in taking care of housing, education, and jobs for the most vulnerable of society. We went to a special service called Mercy Street, which ministers to all people but focuses upon the struggling people of society, like recovering addicts. We went to St. John's United Methodist, which took over a dilapidated building and now is a vital congregation that houses incredibly energetic services every Sunday morning. We visited a church called Ecclesia, which seeks to speak a relevant message to the world of today. And that's just scratching the surface. We talked to so many people, so many visionary Christian leaders, that helped blaze the trail for these vibrant ministries to take hold. There were many incredible sights, ministries, and stories that we were able to see and partake in. It just reminds you that God's spirit is constantly moving in ways we expect and ways we may not, and sometime they grow over a long period of time.

All these ministries had one thing in common: they began in small ways. They sought to be relevant to the communities they lived in. They saw what was around them; they saw how they could best minister to the people they worked with and the neighborhoods where they lived. They sought to give glory where glory was due. Indeed, they absolutely bathed their work in prayer. They focused upon the question "What is God calling us to?" beyond any other thought in their mind. When that happened, everything else came into focus. Their visions were clearly implanted in that mentality. At first, I wondered if they just stood back and admired all that they had accomplished. St. Johns in

Downtown Houston had a preacher that inspired you to live a life of radical gratefulness. I mean, the pastor of FaithBridge had utilized a transformation that went from nothing to incredible in just 17 years. Sure, that's a process, but look at all they'd done! And then, I realized I was asking the wrong question. It's the wrong mentality to look at a church or any other accomplishment and say, "Wow! Look at what I've done!" That's putting the onus on the wrong thing, whether we do it in big or small ways. It's a human tendency in our current day; it's a human tendency throughout the scriptures.

The disciples clearly had a mindset when they were walking the streets of Jerusalem. They beheld one of the greatest wonders of the world in that time, the Temple, and they lauded the wonderful nature of it. They lauded its incredible craftsmanship, its utter size, its majesty on the skyline of the ancient city. Then there's Jesus. I just imagine him standing there, totally unimpressed. After all, this was the Word, present at the beginning of creation. He brought the world into being, the entire universe, and here is the Temple. This is not anymore a sign of God's goodness but has been corrupted by the authorities who have collaborated with the Romans. He looks upon it and says plainly, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." He's uninspired by the greatest sight in all of Judaism.

There's a lot of ways to interpret Jesus' message. After that statement, he speaks of his coming again and what the signs will be. He foretells the destruction of the second temple, which fell in the year 70, roughly forty years later. He is, at the same time, trying to tell them that that is not the sign of the end; there is much more to come. But I think one of the main themes behind all of this is making ourselves and our accomplishments the focus in God's world. It's a very real but a very subtle danger in each of these issues.

Just to warn you, this is one of my biggest bible pet peeves. One problem we discussed in detail during our Bible study on Revelation, is trying to use the Bible as a secret code that will tell us exactly when the return of Jesus Christ will take place. Right in the middle of our study about the dangers of such things, there came yet another special prediction about when the world would end. The group eBible Fellowship told us that Jesus Christ would return to judge us all on October 7, 2015. Take a look at your watches, and take a look around. It is November 15th, and we are still here. As you know, the date came and went without incident, despite their warning that there was, “a strong likelihood this would happen.” Well, it didn’t, and those people who based their entire faith on their own understanding of scripture came to a huge disappointment.

Friends, the Return of Jesus Christ will come in its own time, but it’s human pride and ambition that tries to figure out exactly when and how God will work. If there’s one thing the bible teaches, it is that God shows up when God darn well feels it’s right. So, let’s not wrap ourselves in predictions and codes that give us dates. Is that not putting ourselves in God’s shoes? They’re just a little too big for us, aren’t they? It’s a fallacy that happens time and time again. “Look! This is foretold in Revelation!” or “Look! This is foretold in Daniel!” You might see things that correlate, but when it’s about figuring out the code more than it is living each day how we might best glorify God, things get off track. I’ll repeat probably the most important scripture on the matter, just so we’re all on the same page. It comes from Matthew 24:36: “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” And again in 1 Thessalonians 5:2: “For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” That sounds specifically unspecific to me. Just look throughout history, and you’ll

see hundreds of times people said “I have the right answer!” and it all came to nothing. The sun rose, the sun set, just as it does every day under God’s watch. In a very subtle way, they used the bible to make it all about them, not God, and that’s a danger we all must face.

Jesus’ warning is clear: “This is the beginning of the birth pangs.” Just the beginning. I know there are a lot of mothers here, and they could tell you a thing or two about giving birth. It’s not easy, right? It’s easy for me as a man to say, right? I’m not the best authority, but I’ve heard the stories. Ask anyone who has given birth, and they’ll give you the same message. When one’s water breaks, the baby doesn’t come out immediately, right?. I know my family’s story. My sister took 72 hours of labor. I was good and only took about 12. When one starts contractions, that doesn’t mean all done in five minutes. It takes time. It takes effort. It’s a lot of pain, but it’s all worth it. When the birth comes to completion, it’s beautiful new life, both for the child and for God’s plan.

But it’s not just about how we read and understand scripture. We put God in second place in big and small ways, and the story that takes it all in is the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. Young humanity gets so prideful, they say “we will make ourselves like God!” They want to ascend to heaven and show everyone how good they are. So, they build a building, the biggest in that time of history, to ascend to the heavens. Well, God says they need a little lesson in humility, so God confuses them and sends them on their many ways. Pride, as they say, goeth before a fall. There is a modern retelling of the tower of Babel. It’s called Jurassic Park. Remember that movie? In it, scientists realize that they can resurrect ancient dinosaurs using a mix of DNA, so they utilize modern science to bring them back in an amusement park setting. No matter what safeguards they had, no matter what they did to contain these creations, they broke loose, leaving a lot of residual damage in their way.

“Life finds a way” is the repeated rationale, and it’s true. Human pride cannot contain what God has made to flourish. When humans put themselves in the place of God, bad things are bound to happen.

When you look at this story from Mark, the point is that it is not the building but the emotion behind it. “Look at all we can do!” It’s putting ourselves in the place of God in big and small ways. Whether it is in one way Jesus speaks, of the day of the Lord, we get too big for our britches in trying to figure out how God will work when God’s gonna do what God’s gonna do. It’s like saying God’s a Packers fan when it’s all too clear that’s not the case. But more seriously, it’s too much in thinking all about what we can do that we forget to think about what we should do. In those churches I saw, the first question was not “how can we make our church grow?” but “how can we best glorify God in all that we do?” and “How can we make disciples for Jesus Christ?” After all, there’s a difference between church growing and discipleship. When you make disciples, you get the church. When you grow the church, you don’t necessarily get disciples.

On the other hand, look at what happened in Paris Friday evening. That’s the other side of the coin. Those who committed such atrocities chalk it up to giving praise and glory to God, when no religion, and I mean no religion, validates violence and killing for God’s glory, but religion is often used as the rationale to validate violence. Let’s weep that God’s name is used in ways that demean God’s creation. That’s more about humanity, and, once again, let’s put credit where credit is due. God empowers us to live lovingly and fully for the benefit of God’s creation. Selfish brokenness and sin allows us to impose our desires for violence and destruction on scripture. It can be as big and horrible as the attacks in Paris; it can be as small as a negative word or look to a neighbor.

So, the bottom line, as John Wesley says, “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, in all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.” That is our calling as Christian peoples, being the hands and feet of the Christ in this world. When doing it, though, make sure the right One gets all the credit. In academic terms, quote your sources. Let’s be sure we never become Divine Plagiarists. Plagiarism, you know, is when you take all the credit for an idea or writing that someone else did. In this way, we give all the credit to God. We do the best good when we serve and work with the Holy Spirit that moves through us, and we give credit and wonder where it is due. Thanks be to God, in which we move and live and have our being! Amen and Amen!