

**March 29, 2009**

**John 12:20-33**

## **Pray Your Way In**

**Prayer is more than praying our way out of trouble;**

**It is praying us into the will of God.**

There are two kinds of Christians-- those who "pray their way in," and those who "pray their way out." Most of us, unfortunately, take our prayer lives most seriously when we are trying to "pray our way out."

--When you're rushing to get to an appointment that you're already late for and you don't notice the cop's car until you've whizzed halfway past it -- Time to "pray your way out."

--When you walk into class and suddenly realize you are not prepared -- Time to "pray your way out."

--When you get a letter with a return address from the Internal Revenue Service -- Time to "pray your way out."

--When your company announces it will begin downsizing/"right-sizing"/"upsizing" or whatever else they call it -- Time to "pray your way out."

--When you are confronted with the possibility of a terminal illness -- Time to "pray your way out."

Life hits a skid when situations arise that may cause pain or fear, anger or hardship.

We are suddenly brought up short.

Even those who might not consider themselves very pious or prayerful or even very religious, when faced with these kinds of clutch circumstances, hurl up "panic-button prayers."

We pray to God for help in getting us out of the mess we've landed in.

One has to wonder whether God doesn't spend the better part of the day hearing attempts by people to "pray their way out" of situations. It must get very old. Praying one's-way-out prayers are not very creative or new.

When we're trying to pray our way out, there simply isn't time to be eloquent. I know that God listens to my panic-button prayers because Jesus himself got to a point in his life where he authored and offered one of the classic "greats" in this genre of praying:

"God, get me out of here." As he looked down the road toward Jerusalem, he cried out, "Father, save me from this hour."

Sometimes we try to dress up our panic-button prayers by gilding them with flowery promises. We promise we'll never speed, slack, cheat, lie or steal ever again if God will just get us out of this one. As if God hasn't heard that before.

But there is another kind of attitude Christians can take in prayer. Instead of flailing around for an escape hatch, instead of praying our way out, we can "pray our way in" to God's plan for our lives.

--Confronted with the need to make a midlife career change -  
- trust God's plan and PRAY YOUR WAY IN to a new possibility.

--Finding that the demands on your time are causing your blood pressure to rise, your head to pound and your nerves to snap -- trust God's plan and PRAY YOUR WAY IN to a slower pace.

--Discarding another commodity of fun for a community of faith that can nurture your soul while prodding you forward -  
- trust God's plan and PRAY YOUR WAY IN to a new address.

--Worried about the strain on your budget and hating the pinched feeling you always have at the end of the month --

-Page 3-

Trust God's plan and PRAY YOUR WAY IN to a new examination of what is an authentic life style and what is just "lifestyle."

--Grieving over the loss of a spouse -- trust God's plan and PRAY YOUR WAY IN to a renewed love for family and friends.

Much of life is beyond our control. We can't run the show. We can really only control how we react to a situation. We might as well relax and enjoy the show. Why don't we trust God's plan and PRAY OUR WAY IN to a yielded life?

A few years ago Henry Blackaby challenged the Christian community to rethink its approach to God.

In his now classic book *Experiencing God*, Blackaby pointed out that our approach to God most resembles a Christmas wish list -- a litany of blessing "gimmes" that itemizes what we want:

"Lord, bless our church, bless my family, bless my ministry, bless my hopes, bless my dreams, and bless my desires."

Blackaby proposed following Jesus' lead and learning to pray not for what we want but for what God wants for us.

Instead of asking God to bless our lives, authentic discipleship is asking God to "Let my church, my family, my ministry, my hopes, my dreams, my desires be a part of what you are blessing."

Mother Teresa use to talk about shifting our prayers from what we want to what God wants.

In today's gospel text, Jesus shifts the direction of our prayers even further than Henry Blackaby's book or what Mother Teresa once proposed.

Instead of asking God to "save me from this problem," or "deliver me from this mess/stress/distress," Jesus teaches us to ask God to "glorify your name in this action."

When God's voice rang down out of heaven and promised that Jesus was being glorified, some heard angel voices, others heard thunder.

When your life takes unexpected turns, crashes into a barren spot, or overwhelms you with responsibility, do you hear the din of thunder roaring in your ears? Or do you hear the voice of an angel offering you a chance to glorify God?

It's your choice. Either you can try to pray your way out of a thunderstorm. Or you can pray your way in to the glory of God.

In my dentist's office one day I saw a message that hit me right between the eyes: "You don't have to brush all of your teeth, only the ones you want to keep."

I began listing in my mind the reasons why we need dental floss -- 1) to preserve our teeth; 2) to remove the plaque that begins decay; 3) to keep the gums that support our teeth healthy; 4) to prevent gums from bleeding; 5) to avoid painful surgery --

I suddenly realized that we all need "mental floss," defined as creative and critical thinking skills, as desperately as the body needs dental floss -- at least for those parts of ourselves we want to keep.

We need "mental floss" in our lives:

**1) To preserve the church.** We must preserve the best of what we have. As Paul wrote, "Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you" (1 Timothy 6:20).

**2) To remove the stuff that causes decay.** Some of the practices of the church cause decay.

**3) To keep the church that supports our ministry healthy.**

What the church wants and needs from everyone is the use of spiritual gifts for the expansion of the kingdom.

**4) To keep from bleeding.** The church is bleeding. It is losing members to many other ideologies, to sports and hobbies, to television evangelists and to a host of other choices.

To stem the bleeding, we must offer choices that will give them a reason to participate in church week after week, that will leave them feeling good about who and whose they are, that will prepare them to face the world Monday through Saturday with something solid to steer their path ...

**5) To avoid painful surgery.** Many churches are experiencing that surgery today. Churches are cutting back on their service to the community and to the world. They are becoming inwardly focused instead of outwardly focused.

Avoiding the surgery can give new breath and life to a suffering church. Focusing on caring for others can add new life and new blood to a church and, in turn, to an expanded community of faith.

Creative and critical thinking is mental floss. I encourage all of us to use it on a regular basis. Flossing may cause bleeding at first; most creative thinking does. Creative thinking and change go hand in hand.

But if we begin to use creative and critical thinking, we can expand possibilities, discover what is at the foundation of our faith, lift up our core values and expand the church to new and more effective ministry.

Just like flossing, the more we do it, the healthier we become. The more we use our God-given creativity, the stronger Franklin Church and our ministry will become.

Amen!

