

Luke 11:1-13  
July 25, '10

“SECULAR THEOLOGY”

BEFORE BEGINNING THE SERMON, I HAVE TO TELL YOU TWO THINGS.

I THOUGHT ABOUT THESE TWO THINGS AS I COMPLETED THE SERMON & WONDERED WHICH I WOULD RATHER HEAR IF I WERE SITTING IN THE PEW.

THE FIRST THING IS – THIS IS A LONG SERMON – I MEAN *REALLY* LONG COMPARED TO WHAT YOU ARE ACCUSTOMED TO HEARING AT EASTMINSTER.

THE SECOND THING IS – I’VE DIVIDED THIS REALLY LONG SERMON INTO 2 SERMONS & WILL SAVE THE SECOND ONE FOR NEXT WEEK.

I’M JUST GUESSING HERE, BUT I THINK IF I WERE SITTING IN THE PEW, I’D MUCH PREFER TO HEAR THE SECOND THING.

UNLESS A VAST MAJORITY OF YOU RISE IN PROTEST, THAT’S WHAT WE’LL DO.

HEARING NO OBJECTIONS, WE’LL SET SERMON #2 ASIDE FOR TODAY.

THERE’S A STORY OF A MAN NAMED NICHOLAS HERMAN WHO LIVED IN FRANCE IN THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY. AS A YOUNG MAN, HE LIVED IN POVERTY & JOINED THE ARMY WHICH GUARANTEED HIM MEALS & A SMALL SALARY.

HE WAS INJURED IN THE 30 YEARS’ WAR WHICH FORCED HIM OUT OF THE ARMY.

HE BECAME A PERSONAL SERVANT FOR A BRIEF PERIOD OF TIME & THEN DECIDED THAT HE WANTED TO BE A MEMBER OF A MONASTIC COMMUNITY.

HE ENTERED A MONASTERY IN PARIS WITH THE HOPES OF BEING A SCHOLAR.

IT WAS DETERMINED THAT HE REALLY DIDN’T HAVE THE INTELLECTUAL CAPACITY TO BE A TEACHER OR WRITER & SO HE WAS ASSIGNED TO THE KITCHEN.

HE SPENT THE REST OF HIS LIFE IN THAT MONASTERY, WORKING IN THE KITCHEN & THE SANDAL REPAIR SHOP.

HE TOOK THE NAME “LAWRENCE OF THE RESURRECTION” AND, TO THIS DAY, BROTHER LAWRENCE’S PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD REMAINS A SPIRITUAL CLASSIC.

IN HIS SERVICE TO OTHERS, BROTHER LAWRENCE DISCOVERED THAT EVERYTHING IN LIFE CAN BE TURNED INTO A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD – EVERY ACT CAN BE TRANSFORMED INTO A TIME OF PRAYER.

HE SAID, *“IT ISN’T NEEDFUL THAT WE SHOULD HAVE GREAT THINGS TO DO... WE CAN DO LITTLE THINGS FOR GOD. I TURN THE CAKE THAT IS FRYING ON THE PAN FOR LOVE OF HIM. IT IS ENOUGH FOR ME TO PICK UP BUT A STRAW FROM THE GROUND FOR THE LOVE OF GOD.”*

I CAN’T HELP BUT THINK OF BROTHER LAWRENCE IN READING THIS PASSAGE FROM LUKE’S GOSPEL.

IT ISN’T JUST BECAUSE IT’S A PASSAGE ABOUT PRAYER.

I THINK THERE’S AN EVEN DEEPER CONNECTION.

WHEN YOU SEE THE TERM “SECULAR THEOLOGY,” YOU MAY CONSIDER IT AN OXYMORON – IT’S TWO THINGS THAT JUST DON’T SEEM TO FIT TOGETHER.

THERE IS, HOWEVER, AN ENTIRE MOVEMENT THAT GOES BY THAT NAME.

THERE ARE ALL KINDS OF THEOLOGICAL MOVEMENTS.

WE HAVE LIBERATION THEOLOGY, FEMINIST THEOLOGY, BLACK THEOLOGY, PROCESS THEOLOGY & SECULAR THEOLOGY.

FOR ANY AMONG YOU WHO MAY BE FAMILIAR WITH THE ACTUAL MOVEMENT OF SECULAR THEOLOGY, THAT’S NOT WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT IN GIVING THIS SERMON THAT TITLE.

I’M TALKING ABOUT SOMETHING ENTIRELY DIFFERENT.

WE THINK OF THINGS THAT ARE “SECULAR” IN A RATHER NEGATIVE WAY.

WE THINK OF THEM AS BEING CONTRASTED WITH THINGS THAT ARE “SACRED.”

“SACRED” IS GOOD - “SECULAR” IS BAD.

SO WHEN WE TALK ABOUT SOMETHING WE WOULD LABEL “SECULAR THEOLOGY,” YOU CONJURE UP IMAGES IN YOUR MIND THAT ARE NEGATIVE.

THE SECULAR THEOLOGY THAT I’M TALKING ABOUT HAS ITS REAL ROOTS IN THE FIRST CENTURY IN PALESTINE.

ITS MOST PROMINENT PROPONENT WAS A MAN NAMED JESUS.

YES – *THAT* JESUS.

BECAUSE, YOU SEE, “SECULAR” ISN’T A BAD THING.

IT COMES FROM A LATIN WORD MEANING “OF THE AGE.”

IT’S SOMETHING THAT’S RELEVANT TO EVERYDAY LIFE.

SO, WHEN I TALK ABOUT SECULAR THEOLOGY, I’M SIMPLY TALKING ABOUT TRANSFORMING THE SACRED INTO DAILY LIFE.

SURELY THAT’S WHAT JESUS DID.

BROTHER LAWRENCE, FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS, DID THE SAME THING.

THAT’S ONE OF THE MAGNIFICENT ASPECTS OF THIS PASSAGE.

IT’S A PASSAGE ABOUT PRAYER & JESUS BRINGS IT DOWN TO EARTH.

WITH THE WORDS HE SUGGESTS THE DISCIPLES USE IN PRAYER & WITH THE EXAMPLES HE OFFERS TO HELP THEM UNDERSTAND HOW PRAYER WORKS, HE TRANSFORMS THE SACRED INTO DAILY LIFE.

THIS IS LUKE’S VERSION OF THE LORD’S PRAYER.

THE VERSION WE KNOW – THE LONGER ONE – IS FOUND IN MATTHEW’S GOSPEL.

I DON’T WANT TO FOCUS ON THE PARTICULARS OF THE LORD’S PRAYER HERE.

I’D RATHER LOOK BRIEFLY AT WHAT JESUS IS TEACHING HERE ABOUT PRAYER IN GENERAL (THE FIRST HALF OF THIS REALLY LONG SERMON THAT WE’LL HEAR TODAY) & THEN – NEXT WEEK - LOOK AT THE TWO

PARABLES HE TELLS TO HELP US UNDERSTAND HIS SECULAR THEOLOGY – HIS TRANSFORMATION OF THE SACRED INTO UNDERSTANDABLE EXPERIENCES OF DAILY LIFE.

PRAYER IS ONE OF THE FEW THINGS THE DISCIPLES ASKED JESUS TO TEACH THEM.

IN LUKE – MORE THAN THE OTHER THREE GOSPELS – WE SEE JESUS SPENDING A GREAT DEAL OF TIME IN PRAYER.

HE PRAYS AS HE SENSES GOD’S CALL ON HIS LIFE IN HIS BAPTISM.

HE PRAYS BEFORE CHOOSING HIS DISCIPLES.

HE PRAYS AS HE SERVES & HEALS PEOPLE.

HE PRAYS ON THE MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION.

HE PRAYS AS HE FEELS THE PRESSURES OF HIS MINISTRY.

HE PRAYS AS HE FACES THE CROSS.

HE PRAYS AS HE FINISHES HIS WORK ON THE CROSS.

JESUS IS PRAYING CONSTANTLY.

THAT’S PROBABLY NOT TRUE FOR MOST OF US, THOUGH, IS IT.

THERE’S A STORY OF A BOAT THAT WAS SINKING.

THE CAPTAIN YELLED OUT, “*DOES ANYONE KNOW HOW TO PRAY?*”

ONE MAN TIMIDLY RAISED HIS HAND & SAID, “*YES, CAPTAIN – I DO.*”

THE CAPTAIN SAID, “*WELL THAT’S GREAT. YOU PRAY WHILE THE REST OF US PUT ON LIFE JACKETS. WE’RE ONE SHORT.*”

IN THAT SITUATION, MOST OF US WOULD BE WEARING LIFE JACKETS, WOULDN’T WE, BECAUSE MOST OF US WOULD HAVE TO ADMIT THAT WE HAVE DIFFICULTY WHEN IT COMES TO PRAYER.

THE PRAYER LIFE OF JESUS TELLS US SOMETHING ABOUT HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD & IT TELLS US THAT’S SOMETHING HE WANTS US TO UNDERSTAND.

PRAYER IS ABOUT A RELATIONSHIP.

THINK OF SOME WELL-KNOWN PERSON IN HISTORY THAT YOU GREATLY ADMIRE – SOMEONE YOU’D JUST LOVE TO BE ABLE TO SIT DOWN & TALK TO & LEARN FROM.

WHAT IF, BY SOME STRANGE, MIRACULOUS OCCURRENCE, YOU WERE GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SO.

WOULD YOU PASS IT UP?

WOULD YOU SAY, “*I’M TOO BUSY?*”

WOULD YOU MAKE AN EXCUSE, SAYING “*I DON’T KNOW WHAT I’D ASK OR TALK ABOUT?*”

PROBABLY NOT.

YOU’D TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF SUCH AN OPPORTUNITY, WOULDN’T YOU?

IN PRAYER, WE HAVE THAT OPPORTUNITY EVERY DAY – TO TALK TO & LEARN FROM SOMEONE WHO IS A BETTER LISTENER & CAN OFFER WISER GUIDANCE THAN THE GREATEST PERSON WHO EVER LIVED.

PRAYER IS ABOUT A RELATIONSHIP.

IT'S ABOUT HAVING THE GREATEST SOMEONE OF ALL AT YOUR SIDE TO BE WITH YOU – TO TALK TO YOU & LISTEN TO YOU.

A GROUP OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WAS TALKING ONE DAY.

ONE OF THE BOYS HAD LOST HIS SISTER IN A CAR ACCIDENT.

SOME OF THE OTHER STUDENTS ADMITTED THAT THEY HAD THOUGHT ABOUT GOING TO THE BOY'S HOUSE BUT THEY DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO OR WHAT TO SAY.

THERE WAS ONE BOY, THOUGH, WHO DIDN'T LET HIS FEARS KEEP HIM AWAY.

HE ADMITTED THAT HE ALSO DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO OR SAY, BUT HE WENT ANYWAY.

THE ONE WHO HAD LOST HIS SISTER SAID WHAT WAS MOST IMPORTANT TO HIM AT THAT TIME WAS JUST HAVING A FRIEND THERE WITH HIM.

EVEN THOUGH THAT FRIEND COULDN'T DO ANYTHING OR SAY ANYTHING THAT WOULD CHANGE THE TRAGEDY, HIS PRESENCE WAS ALL THAT WAS NEEDED.

IN MANY WAYS, PRAYER IS LIKE THAT.

IT'S THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN YOUR LIFE – NOT THAT GOD WILL ALWAYS CHANGE THE SITUATION YOU FACE, BUT SIMPLY KNOWING THAT GOD IS THERE IS WHAT MATTERS.

GOD IS GOING THROUGH THE TRAGEDY OR SUFFERING OR PAIN OR GRIEF OR DEPRESSION RIGHT ALONGSIDE YOU.

THAT'S WHAT MATTERS & THAT'S WHAT A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IN PRAYER IS ALL ABOUT.

WE HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF HAVING A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD SIMPLY THROUGH PRAYER.

JESUS MADE IT AN INTEGRAL PART OF HIS EVERYDAY LIFE & HE ENCOURAGES US TO DO THE SAME.

WITH JESUS, PRAYER WAS REALLY THE ANCHOR OF HIS LIFE.

IT WAS THE FOUNDATION THAT HELD EVERYTHING ELSE TOGETHER.

I REMEMBER BEING IN CHICAGO WHEN CONSTRUCTION HAD JUST BEGUN ON THE 900 NORTH MICHIGAN BUILDING.

IT WAS FASCINATING BECAUSE I WAS WITH A MAN WHO REALLY KNEW CONSTRUCTION & WE STOOD & WATCHED THE WORK BEING DONE & HE EXPLAINED WHAT THE WORKERS WERE DOING & HOW FAR DOWN INTO THE EARTH THE BUILDING WOULD HAVE TO GO TO BE PROPERLY ANCHORED.

WE WATCHED WHILE PILINGS WERE DRIVEN DEEP INTO THE GROUND & LOAD AFTER LOAD OF DIRT & DEBRIS WAS HAULED AWAY.

THAT BUILDING IS NOW ONE OF THE 25 TALLEST BUILDINGS IN THE COUNTRY & IT'S ANCHORED TO WITHSTAND THE STRONGEST WINDS & STORMS THAT CHICAGO ENDURES.

JESUS IS TELLING THE DISCIPLES THAT PRAYER IS LIKE THAT.

IT ANCHORS US TO GOD BY BLASTING THROUGH THE DIRT & DEBRIS OF OUR LIVES TO ENABLE US TO WITHSTAND THE STORMS OF LIFE.

FOR MOST OF US, THOUGH, IT'S STILL NOT AN EASY THING, THOUGH, IS IT?

WE THINK WE HAVE TO DO IT THE RIGHT WAY & SAY THE RIGHT WORDS & HAVE THE PROPER WAY OF APPROACHING GOD.

THERE'S A STORY OF A SENIOR MONK WHO WAS BOTHERED BY MICE PLAYING AROUND HIM WHEN HE PRAYED.

HE GOT A CAT & KEPT IT IN HIS PRAYER ROOM SO THE MICE WOULD BE SCARED AWAY.

HE NEVER EXPLAINED TO HIS FOLLOWERS WHY HE HAD THE CAT & ONE DAY WHEN HE WAS WALKING DOWN THE HALLWAY OF THE MONASTERY, HE NOTICED THAT EACH OF HIS DISCIPLES HAD A CAT IN *THEIR* PRAYER ROOM.

AFTER SEEING THE SENIOR MONK WITH A CAT, THEY THOUGHT HAVING A CAT WAS THE SECRET OF A POWERFUL PRAYER LIFE!

THERE REALLY AREN'T ANY SECRETS.

THIS ISN'T ROCKET SCIENCE!

IT'S JUST LISTENING & TALKING & PROBABLY – IN TERMS OF IMPORTANCE – IN THAT ORDER.

I LOVE WHAT MARK TROTTER SAYS ABOUT THIS IN HIS BOOK, GRACE ALL THE WAY HOME:

*“THROW ANYTHING UP THERE. STUMBLE, USE BAD GRAMMAR, HAVE LONG EMBARRASSING PAUSES, SPLIT YOUR INFINITIVES & EVEN DANGLE YOUR PARTICIPLES. IT DOESN'T MATTER. JUST GROAN OR SIGH IF THAT'S ALL YOU CAN DO, BECAUSE GOD'S HEARING YOUR PRAYER DOES NOT DEPEND ON YOUR ELOQUENCE BUT ON GOD'S GRACE, WHICH IS ALREADY AT WORK IN YOUR LIFE.”*

THAT'S THE SECULAR THEOLOGY OF JESUS – TAKING SOMETHING SACRED & TRANSFORMING IT INTO EVERYDAY LIFE.

THAT'S WHAT HE SOUGHT TO TEACH HIS DISCIPLES ABOUT PRAYER & IT'S WHAT HE WANTS TO TEACH US.

HE EVEN USES TWO EVERYDAY EXAMPLES TO DO IT...BUT WE'LL LOOK AT *THOSE* NEXT WEEK. AMEN.

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport  
Eastminster Presbyterian Church  
Evansville, Indiana*