

“The Power and the Glory”

I Samuel 12:19-24; Acts 7:54-60

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 19, 2015 – 8th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Everything I've read about the old-time evangelist Billy Sunday indicates that he was one of those colorful Christians who comes along from time to time. They have a flair, a style, a way with words that makes them stand out. Perhaps it was Sunday's background as a baseball player that made him a no-nonsense, straightforward, plain-talking kind of guy.

There's a quote from him which I particularly like: "Going to church doesn't necessarily make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile." I think that's great. There's a lot of truth in that. It's put differently than I might phrase it, but it makes its point.

Usually Sunday could outtalk the best of talkers. It wasn't often that he got upstaged by anybody. But he did on at least one occasion and, of all things, it involved someone from right here in Columbus.

Billy Sunday went from town to town and conducted crusades, much like Billy Graham. Now it was Sunday's custom to make sure that enough advance work was done to ensure the success of the crusade. One thing he always did was to write the mayor of the next city to request a list of people in there who were in need of special prayers. When he wrote to the mayor of Columbus at that time, the mayor responded by sending him the city directory.

That probably wasn't exactly what the preacher had in mind. Yet, it may have been the most appropriate reply he ever got. If the same question were to be posed today, the response could well be the same. Not only here, but everywhere. We **all** stand in the need of prayer, even when we don't know it. Perhaps especially when we don't know it.

Both our scripture passages for this morning have to do with prayer. In our Old testament reading Samuel, a patriarch of the Hebrew people, has anointed a new king at their insistence. Samuel reminds them in this farewell address that God has time and again favored them with acts of salvation. God has loved and cared for them, but often they have been forgetful. They have asked for an earthly king, but they really should have considered the Lord as their real king and shown greater devotion.

Now there has been a great storm in the land and the people are quite fearful. They remember their past misdeeds. So they implore Samuel: "Pray to the Lord for your servants that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins by demanding a king."

Samuel responds with words of assurance, though he does not dismiss their sins. "Moreover as for me," he says, "far be it for me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you."

In the New Testament reading we find that Stephen, an apostle for Christ, has been arrested and false charges have been brought against him. He has sparked opposition and some have brought him before the Sanhedrin on charges of blasphemy. In defending himself, he only seems to have made his enemies more angry against him.

He cites a history of his people, and how they have failed to respond to God. Over and over they have chosen to take the wrong path, the lesser way. They have forgotten what they have come to know. He ends with an indictment of those who have brought him to judgment, for they stand directly in the line of their sinful ancestors. He tells them the truth, but his accusers don't want to hear it.

The mob responds by taking him out to the edge of the city, but perhaps with the sanction of the council. There they prepare to stone him to death, which was done by putting the person in a pit and then filling the hole with heavy stones. Usually the witnesses at the hearing become the lead executioners as well. Perhaps it is a hot day for the passage notes that they remove their coats for the task.

While they are taking out their rage against this innocent man, it says he prayed in these words so that all could hear, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Do not hold this sin against them."

What is common to both readings is the past and continuing sins of the people, and the prayer of a faithful one that these new iniquities be forgiven. They have called for a new leader, but still Samuel prays for his people. They have chosen to silence the truth that Stephen speaks, but he asks God that their evil deed not be held against them. These two prayers remind us of that of Jesus on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Most of the time when we turn to prayer it's about what prayer can do for us. Our texts, on the other hand, are examples of intercessory prayer-- or prayer for others. Both come from situations where the people have done wrong, and yet prayer is readily offered in their behalf. Genuine caring is shown by the very persons who suffer most because of these sins.

Intercessory prayer—praying for others—is the other side of praying for ourselves. We are taught to do both. Each is important for it's right to take our needs and lay them out before God. We are encouraged to put into thought what we experience in our hearts. Through the act of praying we become more in touch with our feelings and with expressing our concerns.

A sincere prayer is not one full of clichés, of outdated expressions or obscure thoughts. It is not jargon or clever word play. Rather, it is honest concern voiced in a direct way. It comes from us and laid before God. It is communication of the most important kind.

To do this, however, we have to be in touch with ourselves. We have to be genuine, and that means we have to look squarely at who we are. If the prayer is for me, what is it I really need? If the prayer is for another, what is it that I want to see happen. Prayer of this type is petition. God invites us to share what we ourselves need and also what we desire for someone else. God promises to hear what is on our hearts.

Prayer doesn't require an advanced degree. Sometimes the more educated we are the more difficult our praying becomes. We may get too caught up with form instead of substance. You see, God doesn't care how we say it, just so that we do. It isn't fancy words that count, but the sincerity of the thought. It isn't the length of the prayer that is of concern, but its clarity.

You may remember Gordon Cooper, one of the earlier NASA astronauts. On one of his orbits in space he was moved to offer this prayer: "Father, thank you, especially for letting me fly this flight. Thank you for the privilege of being able to be in this position; to be up in this wondrous place, seeing all these many startling things that you have created.

"Help guide and direct all of us, that we may shape our lives to be better Christians, trying to help one another, and to work with one another rather than fighting and bickering ... Be with all our families. Give them guidance and encouragement, and let them know that everything will be O.K. Amen."

Perhaps the power of that simple prayer is in the perspective from which it was offered—far out in space where the earth could be viewed in its entirety, where one sphere held all of humanity except for one: the person who looked out that window and was moved to the words I just read.

Seeing the earth from that viewpoint led Cooper to do something that was very natural, and that was to pray for the world and all of its inhabitants. In a similar way, when we can get outside ourselves and our little world, we can begin to see the bigger world of others. We can realize the needs and problems of the people who share this globe with us and, likewise, be moved to pray for them.

Wherever I, and my self-interest, leave off the concerns of others begin. It's right to pray for yourself—in fact, you should—but if you start that way, then finish with a concern for someone else as well. Ask God for what you need, but don't forget to include a concern for others and what they may lack.

Intercessory prayer is the other side of praying for ourselves, and is the natural second part of our petitions. This way of praying is what Christ taught us to do.