

Peter Bankson: Keep Praying

Keep Praying

INTRODUCTION

For the last couple of years I have been signing many of my e-mails to Seekers with the encouragement to “keep praying!” As I read the first lesson for this week, I thought of sitting at my computer, looking at a message on the screen and just before letting it go, typing in “keep praying.” I do it as much to remind myself, as anything else. It seems to help.

Paul and Silas were in a pickle, but hey kept praying and something unexpected opened a new way for them. They had done what seemed like a proper thing ... taken care of a bothersome slave girl by casting out a demon that had possessed her. However, the slave owner, who had lost an easy profit center, was out to get them, and got the crowd riled up. So the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing, beaten with rods, thrown into prison and confined to a secret cell – chained to the wall in the dark. They were in real tribulation.

I had the images from Abu Gharib prison before me as I read this lesson, too. Stripped naked ... beaten ... locked in a dungeon ... chained to the wall. We do not know the details of the abuse that Paul and Silas suffered, but clearly, it was bad.

As Paul and Silas were sitting before the magistrates with the crowd shouting out against them, I doubt that someone sent an instant message to Paul's palm pilot, encouraging him to "keep praying," but they got the message anyway. They kept praying and singing, and in the middle of the night, the prison doors flew open.

All the prisoners could have escaped, but Paul and Silas had a different idea. I do not pretend to know these details either, but by engaging the jailer, who was not the one accusing them, they were able to catalyze a miracle:

Seeing the jailer was about to kill himself because he thought his prisoners had escaped,

... Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' The jailer, called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They answered 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night, he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized immediately. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

(Acts 16:28-34)

Frankly, I think this passage offers us a map of a path to peace in our time, but it will take a lot of prayer to bring

it to light. These are trying times, and we need to keep praying.

The last time I offered the Word was [11 weeks ago](#), in early March. It was the first Sunday we gathered after our formal farewell to 2025, when we offered leadership for the Ecumenical Service and had a reception to give thanks for our sojourn in this place of prayer. Eleven weeks ago.

Here we are, one week from Pentecost, which we thought would be the next last gathering for worship here, and the time drags onward. I have been going to Carroll Street regularly with Keith, Brenda, Jeanne, Glen, Deborah and others, to review our progress with the folks from Manna. Last week we took a hard look at the work that still needs to be done, and we decided that there is no way that we will be able to get a Certificate of Occupancy by the end of this month. That means we will have to postpone our move yet again! Now we hope to be able to have our first worship there on June 27, which means three more weeks of waiting! These continuing delays can be frustrating, even though I understand all the work that still needs to be done. I think about that every time I type, "Keep praying" at the end of an e-mail. It helps me keep our frustrating delays in perspective.

Whether it is waiting in prison for Divine intervention, or waiting at Carroll Street for a Certificate of Occupancy, waiting takes discipline ... discipline and prayer. Prayer under pressure takes discipline.

What is Prayer?

What **is** prayer? The minute I say the word, I am sure something jumps into your mind. For many, prayer is that nightly ritual, begun as a child, when we ask God to be with those we love and then recite the prayer Jesus taught his disciples.

During World War II, when my father was gone to fight in the South Pacific, my mother let me spend one night a week with my great aunt Orpha. She was the one who first taught me about prayer. I shared her bed because her unmarried sister and brothers occupied the three other bedrooms in her house. As I went to sleep, Orpha would remind me of the picture that hung over the sewing machine in her room, a picture of Jesus peering around a door in an ivy-covered wall. It looked like he had just opened the door and was looking to see if I was there. Then Orpha would help me say the Lord's Prayer – the old, King James Version – and leave the room so I could go to sleep. That image, of Jesus at the door, is one of those early and abiding memories for me, and that old version of the Lord's Prayer went in deep and took root. Thank you, Orpha Henneck.

We know that prayer takes many forms – grace before meals, our silent groaning and sharing from the heart as we worship together, angry letters to God in our journals, weekly focus on our concerns by River of Light Mission Group – prayer wears many hats. Whether we are soaking in the open-ended silence of a Dayspring morning or giving our attention to the cicadas on a regular walk by the Potomac, sitting gently with the Bible or letting our tears wash our pain, prayer is the discipline that can help us let go and open ourselves to God's wider wisdom.

Prayer means acknowledging our limits. If it is real, prayer

is an acknowledgement that God is bigger than our most elegant understanding of reality. If we want to hear a new word, one beyond our ability to plan, organize and accomplish, we need to let go of our analysis and open ourselves to the unexpected.

I find that the process of prayer has a lot in common with the creative process that enlivens our artists:

- First, we claim a vision.
- Then, we fill ourselves with information.
- Then we wait for fresh insight before we act.

Of course, it may take a whole prayerful process to let go and open up enough to see a vision clearly enough to claim it. Moreover, gathering all that information is not easy – alternatives, possibilities, constraints, the reality of materials, and relationships, and communities. However, waiting is the challenge – believing that God has a place in the process, that there might be some opening that we have not seen and that Jesus might have his hand on the door we cannot see in the wall of our reality.

Prayer is acknowledging our limits without denying our capabilities or our responsibilities. That is what Paul and Silas did. They acted within their capabilities even as they stayed open to something unimaginable. That is what we need to be doing, too, as we face the terrible circumstances in Iraq, and the minor but frustrating delay in our move.

Prayer is a collaboration with God. Keep praying!

Praying takes Discipline

For most of us, prayer is not the first response when a crisis comes. When I feel threatened, adrenaline floods my system and I am faced with that reptile-brain-level choice of fight or flight. On the other hand, if I am trapped like Paul & Silas, I stiffen up with fear, narrowing my awareness to options that make sense, leaving no room for some amazing, unexpected thing from God.

I am feeling some of that right now, at work. As my spiritual director can affirm, for a long time I have been living with a growing sense that I am being called away from [Communities In Schools](#). A week ago, the CIS national board of directors made some key decisions in the ongoing strategic planning process. One of them is that Bill Milliken, who is the founder of CIS and has been the President since CIS began, has stepped down so new leadership can take the helm. This decision, and the analysis leading up to it, make it clear to me that what CIS will need in the area of government relations is **not** what I have to offer any longer. It is time to leave, and I have begun talking to the leadership about how to time my departure so it fits the unfolding strategic plan as well as possible. I have a key meeting with the new President on Tuesday. He has been with CIS for five years, and I have great respect for his skill, his commitment and his faith. I do not know how that conversation will go, but right now, it looks like I will be leaving there in mid-July, just before we go to Guatemala with the Faith at Work pilgrimage.

This decision has been a long time coming. I have not felt any anger or manipulation. Nevertheless, as I contemplate leaving CIS after 14 years, I feel my adrenaline building: "No reason

to fight, so it must be flight, right?" Wrong. What I need now, in this situation, is to follow my own e-mail advice, keep praying and keep a lookout for Jesus at the unexpected door.

I am being reminded that it is easier to say, "Keep praying" than it is to do it. That is something we have known as a community since Church of the Saviour began, and our first spiritual disciplines were developed. We need the discipline of daily prayer so that we will be able to keep praying even when times get tough, as Paul and Silas did in the prison in Philippi, after they cast the demon out of that slave girl and upset the Roman gentry. Prayer in tough times takes discipline.

Discipline is not an easy word in our time. We are living in what many like to call "the land of the free." Even if that idea is honored more in the breach than in the fact, it still permeates our culture. We do not like others telling us what we must do, even if it is for our own good.

We all know that learning a new skill takes disciplined daily practice. I need to practice every day if I want to speak Spanish on the Faith at Work pilgrimage to Guatemala. Before the last trip, Margreta did practice, and when we got there, she could communicate. I did not practice, and my best effort was "Mi tortuga es rojo," (My turtle is red.) which turned out not to be very useful! I know I need to practice, but I have not found the discipline to do it.

We know that skill-building takes discipline, but I believe

that the motivation has to come from the heart. I've seen it in the way troubled kids respond to new opportunities once they get excited about them, and how hard it is to "make them do what's right," when they're not ready.

When it comes to prayer, we might get further talking about the "practice" of prayer than a "prayer discipline." Practice still has a positive cachet. We know how important it is to practice so we can learn new skills. We believe in practicing – soccer practice, piano practice, practice a chant in circle time, practice a part in a play.

I know how practice builds capability – and courage. I am remembering the three weeks I spent as part of my early Army training, learning how to jump out of an airplane with a parachute. That was three weeks of intensive, disciplined practice!

At the beginning, it was intimidating to imagine hanging under a parachute, heading for the ground as fast as though I had jumped off a one-story building. However, we practiced it in parts ... over and over and over again, until our bodies ached all over. I learned in my bones how to respond in each instant. When the time came, I did not have time to think about it, and I did not need to. The adrenaline was there, but I had options. I did what I had learned how to do. Disciplined practice had taught me what I needed to know.

In the offertory that we are about to hear, Bobby McFarren sings about discipline:

No discipline seems pleasant at the time but painful.

Later on, however it produces a harvest of righteousness.

And peace, for those who have been trained by it.

Discipline, or practice, as part of our prayer life means doing “reps” – repeating patterns until they soak into our bones; learning some things by heart so we have them when we need them; trying one way, then another, so we’ll be able to recognize the unexpected Jesus when he peers through that unknown door.

What is your prayer practice – your discipline?

- Do you claim part of your daily quiet time for open silence, listening for Jesus to rattle the knob on that door in the wall around your reality?
- Do you write letters to God, gleeful or angry, sharing your reality with the Creator who is more than you can imagine?
- Do you hold the names and faces of those you care about in your awareness as you walk, or swim, or sit in silence?
- Have you discovered that you know the version of Jesus’ prayer that we pray together every Sunday ... or some other prayer?

As counter-cultural as it may seem, discipline is essential in a life of faith. It prepares us for times of trial and temptation.

I will keep sitting with my e-mail, imagining the recipient and the contents with as much delight as I can muster. However, I am feeling the need to add something new to my practice, something that makes more room for the unexpected. I

know that as I move into this new time in my life, as I leave CIS, as we move in at Carroll Street, there will be some unexpected developments, and I want to be ready to treat them as opportunities rather than imprisonment.

It will not all be easy, or simple, or even successful. As I think of Paul and Silas, and the sense of failure that they must have felt as they were stripped naked, beaten with rods and dragged off to prison, I am reminded of a poem by Maria Ranier Rilke. I have shared it here before, but it seems to fit, and returning to it is part of my practice:

The Man Watching

*I can tell by the way the trees beat, after
so many dull days, on my worried windowpanes
that a storm is coming,*

and I hear the far off fields say things

I can't bear without a brother,

I can't love without a friend.

*The storm, the shifter of shapes, drives on
across the woods and across time
and the world looks as if it had no age:*

*the landscape, like a line in the psalm book,
is seriousness and weight and eternity.*

What we choose to fight is so tiny!

What fights with us is so great!

*If only we would let ourselves be dominated
as things do by some immense storm
we would become strong, too, and not need names.*

*When we win, it's with small things
and the triumph itself makes us small.*

*What is extraordinary and eternal
does not want to be bent by us.*

*I mean the Angel who appeared
to the wrestlers of the old Testament:*

*when the wrestlers' sinews
grew long like metal strings,*

*he felt them under his fingers
like chords of deep music.*

*Whoever was beaten by this Angel
(who often simply declined the fight)
went away proud and strengthened
and great from that harsh hand,
that kneaded him as if to change his shape.*

Winning does not tempt that man.

*This is how he grows: by being defeated, decisively,
by constantly greater beings.*

Summary

These are trying times, with storms driving across our world. We need to keep praying.

Prayer is a collaboration with God. It acknowledges our limits without denying our capabilities or our responsibilities. That is what Paul and Silas did. That is what we need to be doing as we face the terrible circumstances in Iraq, and the minor but frustrating delay in our move. That is what I need to do as I face my call away from Communities In Schools.

For many folks, prayer is not the first response when a crisis comes. We need the discipline of daily prayer so that we will be able to keep praying even when times get tough. Prayer under pressure takes discipline.

These are tough times. Let's keep praying.

Amen.