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THE PRAYER PLUNGE Michael B. Beough  
Luke 5:1-11 October 25, 2009  
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If you're a guest today, you have come into a church that is on an exciting adventure with God. A couple of weeks ago, we started the E-vent! Can anyone guess what E stands for? That's right. It stands for Evangelism. We're spending 6 weeks together in small groups discussing a book called *Unbinding Your Heart*. And **we are engaging in 40 days of daily prayer inviting God to unbind our hearts so God can make us more effective in sharing our faith with others.**

Now to be honest, Evangelism is kind of scary for most of us. Not all of us are crazy about sharing our faith, whether now or in the future. Some of us simply don't plan on doing it. Ever!

But according to Martha Grace Reese, the author of *Unbinding Your Heart*, the truth is that many churches across our land are dying for one main reason – because the members have lost the passion for sharing their faith. I cannot imagine that God is pleased. I cannot imagine that God is happy to see His churches dying.

In her book, Martha Grace reminds us of something she read as a girl in an *Anne of Green Gables* book. Miss Cornelia, a staunch pillar of the Presbyterian Church, asked one of her friends about another woman's health. "Oh," Susan said, "I'm afraid she's going to have to rely on the Lord now." "Oh, no!" Miss Cornelia responded, "surely it isn't as bad as all that?"

Well, Martha Grace says it is as bad as all that. She did four years of research in mainline churches like ours and came to this conclusion. It's going to take a miracle for things to change.

**Or, to put it in terms of the fishing story in Luke 5, it is going to take each one of us going into the deep with Christ where miracles happen.**

This story in Luke 5 has so much to teach us.

If I were to summarize it, I would do it in the words of Kennon Callahan, a church leadership guru I have known for 25 years. In his books and seminars, he told us over and over. Work smarter, not harder. **Success does not come by working harder. It comes by working smarter.**

That was the lesson Simon Peter learned that day when Jesus climbed into Simon's boat and told him to put out into the deep and let down his nets. All night Simon had tried fishing his way, but came up with nothing, nada, zilch.

Have you ever been there, done that? Have you ever gone fishing and caught nothing? Now, I know some of you are thinking, "Oh, I just enjoy fishing whether I catch anything or not." Well, maybe so. But what if your life depended on it? You know what I am talking about. How does it feel when you work hard, harder, and hardest, and seem to keep coming up empty? You are doing all the right things, all the good things. Still, nothing comes of it, except maybe fatigue and a bit of grouching and maybe discouragement.

That's what Simon was experiencing. Simon worked all night, dragging his nets behind the boat. Night time was the best time for fishing because you could put a lantern over the side. The light would attract the fish. He knew what he was doing, but the next morning he still had an empty boat.

Then he tried it Jesus' way. He went with Jesus out into the deep and he became successful beyond imagining. In fact, Peter could not have imagined the outcome. He knew that Jesus was no fisherman by trade. It makes you wonder why he did it, but he did. He let down his nets where Jesus said, and the rest is history. He caught so many fish, he had to call for help from his business partners James and John to haul it all in. The nets started breaking. The boats started sinking. Grace abounded. Peter fell to his knees before Jesus. Jesus saw it as a teachable moment, the moment he had waited for. He said to Peter, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they got back to shore, it says in verse 11, they left everything – Peter, James, and John left everything and followed him.

This is what I mean by working smarter. Going with Jesus into the deep.

So how do we do that? We do it through prayer.

Maybe you haven't thought of prayer as the way to work smarter, but here is what I want us to get this morning. **It is prayer that takes us into the deep with Jesus where miracles happen.** As I thought about this, I began to wonder how much time and energy I have wasted because I have failed to go into the deep with Jesus in prayer? How many times have I tried it my way and come up empty? I wonder what could God get done through me if I prayed more? If I prayed more deeply?

Martha Grace Reese tells about a church that tried going-into-the-deep prayer. Three high-energy, go-getter women formed the new evangelism committee for Benton Street Church. They were fired up to do great things for God that year. They brought in Martha Grace as a consultant to get some direction about what they could do first. A calling campaign? A bring-a-friend Sunday? Maybe direct mail marketing? They kept asking her what to do.

In a moment of genuine inspiration, Martha Grace said, "Will you trust me?"

"Sure," they all said. "We'll do anything you say."

"Would you spend three months praying together and not do anything else, not make any decisions for three whole months?"

They nearly choked. "WHHHAAATTT?" They were probably thinking about how to get their money back. But finally they agreed.

For three months they met weekly and prayed for an hour. They prayed every morning at 7:30 a.m. no matter where they were. They prayed for the church. They prayed for the members. They prayed for discernment. They prayed for the people they didn't even know that God would love to be able to bring to Benton Street Church. They prayed for each other. They prayed that God would nudge other members to step up and help. They made no decisions. They made no plans for evangelism. They just prayed. At each monthly meeting of the church board, everyone asked, "So what is your committee doing now?" For three months, the answer was the same. "We're still praying." Not the usual committee report, but everyone laughed and loved it. They took a lot of ribbing. An evangelism committee doing nothing. Sounds typical. And then things started changing. They started getting prayer requests and more.

**By the end of the three months, they had almost 50 members ready to help with evangelism.** The group eventually grew to 65. Exactly one year after the prayer launch, the evangelism team presented a report to the church board. The number of visitors had increased dramatically. Instead of the usual 6 or 7 baby dedications that year, there were 16 with 15 being children of new members. They reported 80 new members with most of them involved in small groups. They had even identified what we would call a Signature Ministry with a ministry to a nearby apartment complex.

The three women on the Benton Street Church evangelism team went into the deep with Jesus where miracles happen. They prayed. That is what we have talked about this past week in our Growth Groups. Working smarter instead harder. It is what we are practicing as a congregation with our 40 day prayer journal.

Now, in case you are still wondering about the value of daily prayer and time with Christ, I have asked Layne Littlejohn to share with you this morning. Layne is in the Men's Growth Group that I attend. So some of us have heard him share enthusiastically about his experience with our daily prayer journal.

(Layne)

Going into the deep with Christ. Working smarter, not harder. Daily time with Christ.

If you have not started on that path yet, I urge you to give it a try, at least for the remainder of our 40 days of prayer. You can pick up *Unbinding Your Heart* on the table and find the prayer guide for Week 3 which starts today. **God has miracles to work through you.** God has miracles to work through our church. Let us go into the deep with Christ, and see what miracles will happen.

But let's not just talk about it. Let's do it, now.

First, find the Post-It™ note in your bulletin and get hold of a pen or pencil. Take two or three deep breaths. With head bowed, ask God to reveal to you people he wants you to pray for. Think of people you know who do not go to church or those you know who do not believe or have faith. Think of those you know who are lonely or afraid or hopeless. As God places these people on your heart, write their initials on the Post It™ note. I will give you a few minutes, and then I will pray.

(Silence) Prayer.

Now here is your last instruction. In the hallway, there is prayer wall. When we dismiss worship, I ask you to go to the wall and stick your Post It™ note on it. This will be a symbolic way of placing the people in the hands of God. And one more thing. I urge you to pray for these people daily. Make them a part of your daily prayer. Just lift them up to Christ and pray for God's peace and love in their lives. Take them