

# First Church Pulpit

"IT'S TOUGH TO PRAY AT THE  
LONGUE VUE COUNTRY CLUB"

Text: "I desire that in every place the men should  
pray . . . ."

I Timothy 2:8



## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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This sermon is bound to get me in trouble, not so much with you good people here in Fort Lauderdale, but with my old friends and fellow travelers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, more especially those who hold membership at the Longue Vue Club. If you know the area, you know that Longue Vue is near enough a bit of heaven here on earth. It sits up at the end of a long private drive, lined with the most exquisite rhododendron bushes I have ever seen. The road crosses through the eighth hole of the golf course that is immaculate, well kept, rolling, hilly, and beautiful. It is a trifle awesome to drive by, for from the elevated tee above the road to your left, one faces a huge ravine, 175 yards to get across, and 50 yards deep. I have many times been down at the bottom looking for golf balls - from others in my foursome, of course. I always drove the 200 plus yards with ease.

The huge clubhouse is made of native quarried sandstone, thick as a fortress, strong and proud. The Pennsylvania slate covering its enormous roof is the thickest, largest slate I have ever seen. The club has two swimming pools, sufficient tennis and paddle courts, several dining rooms, a ballroom, an outdoor pink patio overlooking the Allegheny River from 1,200 feet above sea level where you can eat out on the Pink Terrace when weather permits. On the south side there is another terraced dining area which looks out over a bent grass practice putting green that I was always afraid to walk on. I mean it is Pittsburgh's finest. Only good folk belong. It is a bit exclusive, but oh, it is nice. Tallulah Bankhead once said, "I've been rich and I've been poor. Rich is better!"

I had a ministerial membership there for well over twenty years. The initiation fee at the time, which thankfully was waived, was twice my annual salary. Nice gift. My Peggy

often called it a license to spend money. We were often drawn there to enjoy. Longue Vue had the best food in town, one of the best golf courses, along with Oakmont, Laurel Valley and Fox Chapel, and in case you didn't hear me, it is posh. More Cadillacs, Lincolns, Mercedes, BMW's, and Rolls, per parking foot space, than anywhere on earth. Oh, as a poor boy from the Hill, I loved it.

Back then I was at the Shadyside Presbyterian Church, a fine Richardson Building, with magnificent Tiffany windows all around. I was Assistant Minister. The Senior Pastor exited for the summer months, so Junior Cromie got to preach. Our parishioners exited, too. Attendance dropped to next to none in the non-air-conditioned sanctuary. It gets so sticky, hot and humid in Pittsburgh in August...well, I almost died each time I preached. It is much more comfortable to preach in Florida in the summer. Many of the church members, I discovered, went out to cool off at the Longue Vue Club pool and golf course. We broadcast live those days on KDKA radio. In my first year there, during the week, people would compliment me: "That was a nice sermon you had last Sunday, Reverend Cromie." I tried to remember where they were sitting. They must have been behind a pillar. I still come across people who pretend to have been in church. They think I don't see them or miss them. I have some pop quizzes I use. I caught the Longue Vue folk, too. It turned out that one of the young ladies took a portable radio out to the Longue Vue pool, and they all listened to the sermon sitting there by the cool clear water, keeping watch over their nearly perfect children in the kiddie pool nearby.

The occasion which prompts me to bring Longue Vue to the pulpit today is shrouded some in my memories of thirty years ago, but I have a fairly accurate recollection of what

went on one afternoon when I came by the pool after having played an impeccable round of golf. I could murder the ball back then. (I was shocked last week when a man we had been paired with for a foursome said: "Boy, for an old timer you sure can hit the ball." Me!) Anyway, I spoke with some of my church members that day. Sally said, "It is wonderful to worship with you on Sundays out here at the pool, Reverend Cromie. We get to listen to the sermon outdoors right in God's open heaven." I said, "I hope you sent your offering in." She smiled. Then I said, "Do you pray for us down at the Church when you are out here at the pool?" She chuckled and said, "Reverend, it's tough to pray at the Longue Vue Country Club." It's tough to pray at the Longue Vue Club.

I smiled knowingly, but on the way home I wondered exactly what she meant. Surely, it had to do with the opulent surroundings, and apparently easy lives some people seem to live. It isn't so easy, by the way. Money does not solve life's major problems. When times are critical, when you are down and out on your luck and in need of almost everything, prayer does come easier. But, when you have everything you need and the chauffeur drops the children off and the Norwegian au pair takes care of them, and your main financial problem is where to invest your next round of dividends, when you look through a huge catalog from Bergdorf Goodman and realize that there is nothing that you need, or even want...I mean, when you are on Easy Street, it is tough to remember to pray. It is tough to remember to pray at most country clubs, unless of course it is for the success of a four-foot putt, and I don't think God chooses to answer that one unless you hit it straight, or promise to put your winnings in the offering tray.

Now I am exaggerating to make a point. Wealth and success have little to do with quality of faith, I know. Some of

the most deeply committed people I know, and some of the most generous, are those with the most means and great success. But also, some of the most wonderfully generous and faithful people I know are those, like my family and probably yours, who had next to nothing. The generosity of the poor is a wonder to behold. My father used to set aside his "church dues" before he paid anything else.

I know that...but for some reason, I never forgot what she said. The implication was more important than her words. It implied, as many feel, that prayer is primarily something used to get things we want from God - murmur a few words for some positive results, while prayer is supposed to be a communication with our Heavenly Father. From an earthly point of view, imagine a father whose children approach him only when they need something. Imagine the insult to him. If relationship is always "This is what I want," not "This is what I want to share," it gets tiring. If it bothers the earthly parent, it surely bothers the Lord of all.

So what is prayer then? Why should we pray without ceasing, as our text says in I Timothy: "I desire that in every place the men should pray [and women, too]...". It is more than just asking for little favors. It is more of an attitude to life, a way to put oneself at home in the universe.

Prayer...leave the golf course behind...now...There are four substantive comments I want to make: On almost every survey about what sermons people would like to hear, Prayer is always, always number one. Once or twice each year I try to broaden our ideas on Prayer.

1) First, Prayer is a way of phrasing our spiritual thoughts, capturing them, thinking them through, and

expressing them, a way to get away from the "everydayness" of the lives we live. We all get worn out and worry. Who knows why? For some it is overwork, too much running around, too many expectations from too many areas. For others it is the burden of wondering what to do next, of accepting the twists and turnings and changes in the world...that all can wear you down. The Lord wants us to slow down and pray.

Preparing for prayer, we need to spend time and energy pulling together what we are and believe inside, sharing our struggles, our goals, our gratitude, our faith pilgrimage with Christ. One day the disciples said to Jesus, it was almost their first request, "Lord teach us how to pray." They apparently had the same problem we have of rushing into the presence of Almighty God with a whole bundle of things in need of His attention. In answer to the request, do you remember what Jesus said? He said: "Pray like this: 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven...'" The Lord's Prayer...

That is what I call "phrasing spiritual thoughts." It comes first, acknowledging that God has a will and purpose for your life, and that you can find it, that you care about God's Power and Presence in the world. The Lord's Prayer goes on to specify the things we want and need: forgiveness, forgiving others, the provision for our daily keep, and all the rest...but, the prayer ends with a repeated phrasing of spiritual things: "For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."

That is our pattern. Ask whatever you need, but begin and end with adoration of the Power and Might and Love of God. God is good. We have been given much. First, prayer is a way to phrase our innermost spiritual thoughts. Preparing

to pray is as important as praying.

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2) But, secondly, Prayer is a marvelous way to express our intimate concerns for others. Here again, thinking should precede praying. I recommend a little scheme with pen and paper in hand. Jot down your concerns for the people you know, for our society, for our community, our church, the world, for the social, political, cultural problems.

Then write a little paragraph about each. Focus on it. Concentrate. What do I really want for my son, my husband, my friend, the poor? What do I want God to do to help? Obviously you want the Lord to protect them and guide them, but be specific in your details: Lord, this is what I want. Somehow the Bible seems to say that God listens more carefully to specific prayers. Read those chapters in St. John where Jesus prays for His disciples, for the world. He is specific. Write it down. This is what I want for my daughters, my fellow students, my mother, my pastor. This is what I am grateful for. I hope you pray for me, your pastor.

Liken it to an assignment you might receive from your boss to make a presentation to your company's Number One account. Liken it to a proposal you have to make to your graduate study advisor, or a summation of the trial before the Judge and jury. Liken it to some words you might say to a friend you have betrayed. Liken it to a speech you have to make before your annual meeting. It really is at least that important, isn't it? Talking to God. You would not rush into any of these important occasions unprepared, or if you did you would be a fool. If it is important, you prepare it. That is the point.

I do not know how much time you spend in prayer, but if you set aside ten minutes each day to write down what you want to say to the One who made it all, then five minutes in expressing it, that would probably be a good start. If your health is important to you, you will spend some time each week in scheduled time to walk, jog, cycle, workout, or whatever. If you do not take care of your body you are a fool. But if you do not take care of your soul it is even worse. Take time to write it down.

Then take your little paragraph for each item and spend some time sharing with the Lord God what you want Him to accomplish. I find it easy to carry a little prayer list. Something tangible that when I am sitting in traffic I can reach into my pocket and pull out and spend time that otherwise would be total frustration. You can pray anywhere, "at all times."

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3) Thirdly, Prayer is a marvelous way to express to God our concerns for ourselves. This is very personal. You probably do not want to share this list with anybody. But again, take a paper and pen and begin to write little paragraphs about anything and everything that you want God to accomplish in your life. Be detailed and specific again. Be as personal as you can be. It is the Lord God you are speaking to. He loves you. He will not tell anyone what you say, what you wish, what you have done, the ultimate in confidentiality. List all the things you need or want to change. Focus your prayer power on them one by one.

I wish we could all practice it right now. I would not mind if you made some mental notes while I am speaking.

What do you want to change about yourself? Do you have a nasty temper? Do you hurt the ones you love? Well, pray to God to ask Him to intercept you when you move that way, to put a road block on your tongue.

As my Dad grew older he used to say, "It's a wonder any children grow up happy and healthy the way parents treat them as if they can't do anything. The way parents say so swiftly, 'No, not that way. For goodness sakes, let me do that!'" A parent's chief goal should be to inspire self-esteem within a child, not to go on nagging and scolding. St. Paul issued that caution. Pray that God will give you calm no matter how frustrated you become. Love never ends, it says. But, you can bury it by anger.

Or maybe it is some habit you have, some addiction to carelessness, to drugs or drink or nicotine or food. My heavens, if you phrase a little paragraph in the specific to say, Lord give me the power to cure this thing, this awful life threatening thing..."Ask and you shall receive," the Bible says. You will if you are serious. Speak it to the Lord, and you might not need a hypnotist or nicotine patch or two years of psychotherapy. At times you will need counsel and help. Pray to God to help you find that, too. But, tell Him the exact help you need. Be honest. Be specific.

Suppose you called your doctor because something was wrong. He will say, "What brings you here?" You will say, "I don't know." He will say, "Where does it hurt?" If you say, "I don't know, just cure me, Doctor," he or she won't know what to do.

I used to have a little Chinese medicine doll. I lost it. It was used in China for centuries. A maid would take the doll

to the doctor. It was not thought appropriate for him to examine a woman first hand. The messenger would pinpoint on the doll exactly where her mistress hurt. It was a funny way to practice medicine, but it makes this point. You have to tell the one who has the power to cure you of the problem. The more detail and analysis you can give, the easier is the healer's task. If you are not honest with your doctors, they cannot help you very much. If you do not listen to what they say, you are stupid. The same is true with God. He knows what you need before you ask, but He needs you to hear it inside your soul.

Or maybe, you have an addiction to a person or a memory, one that causes you trouble and interferes with other things you need to do. Assuming that addiction is not wholesome, and it probably is not, then phrase a little paragraph to God: "God, help me to be myself and not remain as a shadow of him or her, or anyone. Free me to be myself and not be dependent on someone else to find my happiness."

Maybe your marriage is getting tired, or you are drifting... Are you with me? There are a thousand examples I could give. Prayer is a wonderful way to personalize what you want God to do for you. You can say a broad "Bless me, Lord, help me." But, a better way is to nail it down on the bottom line and say, "Lord, you know I have been a fool here, there, anywhere. Give me Your Power to gain my power to change it."

It is hard to believe that if you ask the Lord to guide you in what you should do each day, if the first thing in the morning you would ask God to help you, say, not to smoke, that you would go out and light up before breakfast. He will speak to you, instantly. You need only to listen.

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4) Fourth and last, combining all the other three, Prayer is your opportunity to talk with God. Ponder that for a moment with me. Some years ago I had a friend who was called to Washington to meet with President Reagan, face-to-face. I have another friend who had a private audience with the Pope. And, still another friend in London who was summoned to meet the Queen. They were excited, proud and overjoyed that someone so important wanted to talk to them. Did you get it? In prayer we are addressing the King of Kings, the Lord of all, the One who owns the universe. The One who has the keys to your eternal life. The One who came back from the dead. He wants to talk to you. He wants to listen to you. What flattery. What a gift. What a joy. The One who made the starry heavens knows you and me by name. And, He calls us from the tumult to slow down, pause, and speak to Him.

Again, I recommend you get a pen and paper. Remember my friend who went for a private conference with President Reagan? He planned and rehearsed what he was going to say for weeks. He said he stuttered when he got there, but he planned what he wanted to say. Carlyle Marney once wrote that all of us should "s-s-s-stutter" when we try to speak to God.

Write down what you want to say to Christ. It is worth a little time so you can say it right. If you have to, you can borrow from other prayers. He doesn't mind. You can begin with one of the great Psalms, or a prayer written through the ages, or any book of prayers just to guide your thoughts and focus on what you want to say to Him. Then, I encourage you to keep those prayers so that you can chart your spiritual and

personal progress through the years.

I do not know what you want to say. I work hard at what I want to say. My guess is that you would want to thank Him for the gift of life, to praise Him for His love, for those who love you, to adore Him for His blessings, to ask Him to forgive you (be specific there as well), to ease your loneliness, and then tell Him what He means to you, just as you would tell your father or your mother or a favorite teacher or friend how much they mean to you, the one you really care about..."I desire that in every place men and women should pray."

Wherever you are, even at the posh Longue Vue Club - under God's great big blue sky, pray without ceasing...Say "Thank you," then "Please." For now and evermore. Amen.

We thank Susan Swanson for typing this sermon.