

A Call to Prayer

Two weeks ago we began a series of sermons from the Gospel of Mark. Mark's message is presented as good news. The Lord is coming and is come in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is here, Jesus is baptized by John. Jesus is affirmed by a voice from heaven to be the very Son of God. Jesus is tested by the devil, attended by angels, and calls followers to be fishers of men. Jesus demonstrates His power over evil spirits and His authority to heal all manner of human sickness. We get all of this in the first 34 verses of the first chapter of Mark.

One of the the features of Mark as noted by biblical scholars is that Mark is very action oriented and that one action follows another in rapid succession. We can certainly see this in the first chapter. Mark wastes no time getting into the action, and if we are moving with him as we read or listen to this account being read, we are mentally out of breath by the end of verse 34. It's a lot to digest in a very short space. It seems to me that Mark's presentation is very contemporary. In today's world we are used to living at a hectic pace. We are mentally out of breath most of the time.

But in verse 35 we are given a little breather and are shown one of the most important things we need to see about Jesus and one of the most important things there is to know about living as the children of God. Mark 1:35 says, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." In the midst of all the action, Jesus sought out solitude and devoted Himself to prayer.

I would remind us this morning that in coming to be our Savior, Jesus also came to be our role model. Paul goes so far as to say in Romans 8:29: "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." Thus, if Jesus found it necessary to seek out solitude and prayer, He is by example calling us to solitude and prayer as well. If He needed this, and He did, then **we need it even more.**

But, what does solitary prayer do? Why is it so important and what can we expect it to accomplish? The first answer to this question is that prayer in solitude is our spiritual lifeline. Jesus prayed to maintain His intimacy with the Father.

The image that comes to my mind here is that of the old-fashioned deep sea divers, who put on a heavy suit with a diving helmet that was fed from an air hose from a boat on the surface. The suit and helmet were designed to withstand great pressures and to protect the diver

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from being crushed in deep water, and the air hose was his lifeline. Without air the diver would suffocate in just a few minutes; if the air hose were severed he was a goner.

Prayer is our spiritual air hose. Without this vital lifeline to God we cannot breathe spiritually. In this fallen world we find ourselves in a hostile and poisonous spiritual environment; **prayer is how we breathe.**

A second thing that prayer in solitude accomplishes is that it brings us into an intimacy with God through which we are able to understand our purpose, the mission vision for our lives. Look at Mark 1:36-39: "Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!' Jesus replied, 'Let us go somewhere else--to the nearby villages--so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.' So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons."

We notice here that after a period of intimate prayer and being alone with God the Father, that Jesus clearly understands His priorities and his purpose. The vision is clear.

This is very important for us as individual Christians and for us as a church. The needs around us are legion. There are so many needy people and so many places where we can contribute our time and money that it is mind-boggling. We know that as disciples of Jesus we are called to care about people and help them in the name of the Lord. We know we are not to be selfish; we know we are called to give sacrificially. But the needs around us are so great and the cost of helping is so large that we are tempted to throw our hands up and think that there is nothing we can do to make any difference. All too often we don't know what to do and so we do nothing. Or we give money out of guilt and then resent the gift afterwards.

Verse 37 of Mark 1, shows us that Jesus was facing a similar situation. Jesus' disciples inform Him: "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus was known as healer and one who could deliver people from evil spirits, and everyone was looking for Him. Having taken on human form, Jesus was limited just as you and I are limited. He couldn't help everyone. How did He know what to do? From spending time with the Father, Jesus knew He was called to minister in as many villages as possible. He also knew He was called to end up in Jerusalem. Because He understood the Father's call upon His life, He knew how to prioritize His time and optimize His energies to fulfill His purpose.

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Giving time to be with the Lord in prayer helps us to manage the time we have left.

Prayer in solitude is our lifeline to God and enables us to live our lives in His will. A third thing that prayer in solitude does is to give us a message to proclaim and power to overcome evil. Verse 39 says of Jesus, "So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons." Spending time in God's presence until we have heard something from God equips us with a message that others need to hear, a message that we can deliver with authority because we have received it from God. People who heard what Jesus had to say were impressed with Him because He spoke as one who had authority and not as the Pharisees and teachers of the Law.

As our nation gears up for the Presidential election in 2008, it seems to me that people are looking for a candidate, and would be most likely to vote for a candidate, who seems to understand the issues and can speak to them with a sense of authority. The more we see that candidates are just trying to tell us what they think we want to hear, the more we see that they are just playing politics and have no real convictions of their own, the more disgust we feel toward them. The same thing is true of Christian witnesses. When what we have to say truly comes from the throne of God, people are a lot more likely to listen. God's word will not go out without effect.

Spending time alone with God in prayer also gives us the ability to recognize and do battle against evil. One of the great spiritual dangers of living in the world as we find it today is that more and more, evil is being called good and good evil. Or, it might be more accurate to say that there are no more black and white thoughts or behaviors; rather, everything has become gray. Thus, abortion is gray, homosexuality is gray, living together outside of marriage is gray, pornography is gray, Satanism is gray, drug abuse is gray, Christianity is gray too. Almost everyone is walking around in a spiritual and moral fog. The best antidote to gray is to spend time in the presence of God. **Spending time with God will clear the air and enable us to speak with authority.**

A fourth thing that happens when we seek God in solitude is that It gives us compassion for people and the ability to help them. Mark 1:40-42 says, "A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be

clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured."

I had a wonderful compliment given to me not long ago by someone who has just recently begun attending our church. This person said, "you love everyone, don't you?" I'm not sure whether that word was meant to me personally or to us as a church, but either way, I'm glad that this is a message we are communicating.

But, as much as I was gratified by that comment, I was also humbled. I was humbled because I know the love does not originate with me or even from us; it is the gift of God and comes from the Spirit of God working within us and among us. It's interesting that it was a leper who received compassion from Jesus, because a leper in Jesus' day was the most outcast and ostracized person in society. He was the lowest of the low. When Jesus had compassion on the leper He was showing us God's heart toward all outcast people.

The lepers of our society are legion: Those known to have HIV, the mentally impaired, the morbidly obese, amputees, addicts, those with prison records, the very poor, and the homeless. And, frankly, in and of ourselves we would not be able to love some of these or perhaps any of these. But if we dare to get close to God in prayer--if our hearts get close enough to catch the contagious infection of His love--we will find ourselves loving the lepers. One of the real ways I know I belong to the Lord and that He lives in me is that I find myself loving people whom I could not love without Him. One time I would have shied away, but now I don't. Would you say, **Time in His Presence compels and enables us to love.**

Prayer in solitude connects us with God, enables us to live our lives in His will, gives us a message to share, helps us to recognize and resist evil, and enables us to love the outcast. A final thing we see in our Scripture this morning is that spending time in God's presence sets us free from a religion of law and brings us into the freedom of the Son of God.

Mark 1:43-45 say: "Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: 'See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.' Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere."

I don't know about you, but I find Jesus' command to the leper to keep silent about what had happened to him, to be rather unreasonable. I mean what did Jesus expect? To be cured from a dreaded, disfiguring, ostracizing disease such as leprosy is not something to keep a lid on. Could I keep quiet about a thing like that? Could you? I don't think so! Surely, Jesus must have known what was going to happen. If that is so, what are we to make of this command and the leper's exuberant disobedience? I cannot say for sure--at least not without spending a lot more time in prayer and solitude--but, maybe this was Jesus' way of obeying the law while at the same time pointing out the futility of the Law. If the man really had leprosy, the Law could not help him. If God cured him, the law was unnecessary. Law cannot command love or provide healing; nor can it snuff it out. Jesus is greater than the Law. We don't need the Law; we need a relationship with the Lawgiver. Prayer in His presence sustains our relationship with Him. **A living relationship with the Lawgiver sets us free from law-bound religion.**

I would have us see this morning that spending time alone with God in prayer is absolutely necessary if we would become what we are meant to be in Christ. It is the way forward. It is the way we stay connected to God and find the power to discern and live according to His will. It gives authenticity to our testimonies, and gives us power to recognize and defeat evil. It empowers us to love the outcast and enables us to live in the exuberant freedom of the children of God. If we are going to fulfill our kingdom potential as the children of God and as a Church of God, there is no other way. We must become a people of prayer, a house of prayer.

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Mark 1:35-45

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