

Pastor Eric's Sermon
February 4, 2018

"Needed and Offered" – Mark 1: 35-39

While serving a previous church, I preached a sermon on prayer in which I talked about how much I value my quiet reflection time, the time I set aside for centering and discernment. For a few weeks after, some folks didn't know how to respond. When they called or stopped by the office, they would apologize asking, *I am not interrupting your prayer time, am I?* My response would always be the same. *No, not at all. If I was praying and didn't want to be disturbed, I wouldn't have answered the phone, or I wouldn't be in the office.*

There were probably many reasons for people's responses. Some, no doubt, thought they were being funny. Others may have been hiding behind their own discomfort, or else they may have not understood the point I was making.

I tell this story because I believe prayer means different things to different people. We all have our own understanding of prayer, and we pray for different reasons, with different expectations. We may pray for guidance or direction. We may pray for another person's healing. We may pray on the run, or only in a crisis or difficult situation. We may pray, asking God to take something away, or to alleviate or fix a situation. We may pray, hoping to show God how good or faithful we are, in hopes of earning God's favor. We may even use pray to try to bargain with God. All of these are very real, and very human reasons why people pray, but they don't capture what is happening in today's story.

As most of you know last weekend was the Men's Retreat, and while I can neither confirm nor deny some of the stories floating around, I can say we did discuss issues related to faith. This year we discussed Leslie Weatherhead's book, *The Will of God*. As part of this discussion, we talked about the circumstantial will of God, what it means to offer the loving, faithful response in a particular situation. Discovering the faithful, loving response involves discerning the difference between God's will for us, and our will or desire for ourselves.

In this morning's story, this is what Jesus is doing. Jesus is searching. He is trying to discern what it is God is asking of him as he begins his ministry.

Now I know this may sound strange. After all, this is Jesus, and many of us have been taught to not think of Jesus in this way. I would suggest that this story is about a very real and human Jesus, who is just starting out in his ministry. He has answered the call, called his disciples, done some teaching and healing, and suddenly, he is overwhelmed by the response, and the magnitude of what lies before him. His response, is to go off by himself searching, reflecting, seeking to discern. As Mike Graves writes,

The location where Jesus prays is described as 'deserted'. Already in Mark's Gospel we have heard the same description for where John the Baptist appears (4) and where Jesus is tempted (12-13). This description of Jesus at prayer does not seem to be a 'precious moments' image, suitable for framing. Rather the disciples seemed to have discovered Jesus in a time of his own searching, even as the disciples inform him, 'Everyone is searching for you.'

(Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1 pg. 337)

I don't know about you, but I take great comfort in this story. While I don't think any of us have any illusion of being Jesus, there is comfort in knowing that even he struggled, which is why he goes off early in the morning to be alone in prayer.

It is tempting to refer to these moments as Jesus recharging his battery, but in truth, I think what is happening, goes much deeper. Jesus' deep reflective prayer is an attempt to discern God's will, God's desire in and for that particular situation. Such prayer reminds us that the work of discipleship is hard and difficult, and often times challenging.... This is why it is not something we are called to do alone. I know what happens when I try to go it alone, the result is often a mess, because I get frustrated, and lose sight of what it is I am to do. My response, is not what I desire it to be. How about you?

The good news is, God doesn't expect us to go it alone. God knows our struggling is not a sign of weakness or lack of faith, rather, it is a reminder to us that we need God. We need the strength, wisdom, love, acceptance, forgiveness, grace and insight that only God can provide. God expects us to lean on God and each other. This is why we are invited to come to the Table, to take and eat, and remember that our journey is made just that much easier when we welcome God in. When we let God in, God can offer to us what we need, healing amid the brokenness, and strength amid the difficulties of life.

So hear the invitation and promise offered. *Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone opens the door I will come in and be with that one.* God does this, not because we are weak, not because we are foolish, not because we are incapable, but simply because God knows we need it.

So hear the invitation to:

*Come and find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead,
find the room for hope to enter, find the frame where we are freed:
Clear the chaos and the clutter, clear the eyes that we can see
all the things that really matter, be at peace and simply be.*