

**Providence United Methodist Church**  
**"Too Busy to Pray?"**  
**Mark 1:29-39**  
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**February 5, 2012**

We are in the season after Epiphany. This is a time when we look intentionally at who this baby born in a manger in Bethlehem is revealing himself to be for us. We remember the melodic words, "For unto us is born a Savior . . ." We wonder: What does a Savior look like? We ask: How do we recognize a Messiah?

This year our lectionary readings come primarily from the Gospel of Mark, where the identity of Jesus seems for some to be a mystery to solve, and yet his authority is recognized by the demons of the world. Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels and moves very fast. If you never have read Mark, I invite you to do so this week.

This morning I want to focus on the aspect of Jesus' life that seemed to be an essential for him and the source of his great strength and courage as he charted his course through unknown waters while confronting the authorities of his day. That aspect is his prayer life.

In Mark's Gospel things move quickly. It does not open with a birth narrative, but rather with John the Baptizer seeking people to repent as he paves the way, for "one who is more powerful than I is coming after me." The baptism of Jesus by John, Jesus' temptation, and John's arrest as Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee are described in the first few verses of chapter one of Mark.

As Jesus begins his ministry he is noted as one teaching with authority. He has the ability to command unclean spirits to remove themselves from controlling people's lives. They obey. Word of this amazing person spread quickly. In a time and place where the poor and the sick had little hope, word of someone who cared about them and could help them, spread rapidly as it would today.

What exactly was Jesus offering them? Words like "cure" and "cast out" are used, but in our curiosity and television channel CNN mindset of today, we want to inquire deeper. What was going on with those who came to him? We can picture huge crowds descending on Jesus. They wanted to be touched by him and wanted some words from him.

In the midst of this scene of the crowds, Mark records this scene. "In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went to a deserted place, and there he prayed." Jesus, the Son of God, went to find some solitude and to pray. Why? Why would Mark share this scene, yet not even include a birth narrative?

We know who Jesus is, or we think that we do, in 2012. We know he is both God and human. He came into this world as a vulnerable baby in the flesh. He had to deal with his humanity in all of its aspects just like you and I do. But there is this God-part, also. How are the two mixed together and where do we see evidence of the God-part shining through? This reality of Jesus being the Son of God conceived by the Holy Spirit, but yet being the flesh, has been pondered and debated over the centuries. It is important, I think, for us to understand who Jesus is, because if he were all God, then his temptations and physical trials would have been different from ours. He would have had an extra ability to face the challenges of life with more power and strength than you and I have. But if the purpose of his coming is to be Emmanuel (God with us) and to be in the flesh, then he needs to be more like us than not.

The orthodox view of Jesus' identity is that he was fully human and felt all the same feelings that you and I have when we happy and when we are sad; that he had to deal with his humanity as we do; that he had to deal with dying from a human perspective as we do; that is in the resurrection that his divinity becomes visible to us in a different way.

Mark makes the point that this human Jesus needed solitude and prayer in the midst of his journey. He withdrew from the crowds and prayed. Each of the Gospels record times when Jesus prayed. His prayer life was so much a part of his identity that his disciples ask him at one point to teach them to pray. It occurs to me that he also modeled for us a pattern for our journey, both human and spiritual.

We need time, as did Jesus, for quiet, to listen, to talk with God about our lives and God's desire for us in the midst of living day in and day out. Perhaps it sets a rhythm for us as we attempt to live a life of meaning and faith. We are actively engaged in life events all around us, we deal with challenges and demands upon us all the time. We try to make sense of the course of events for our lives, both as individuals and as parts of the community. We seek to find a path that is faithful as well as one that has meaning for who we are and what we are asked to do.

Someone once said our lives are a gift from God and what we do with the time we are granted is our return gift to God. How do we chart a life's course that is fully alive and is engaged with people and situations of our day, yet not lose our way or our focus? Was this also Jesus' dilemma as his popularity grew and the demand for his time grew? I think it was for him just as it is for us.

We all know about quarterback Tim Tebow praying before each of his football games. It now is called "Tebowing." The media emphasize what he does and note the reactions of members of the NFL (National Football League). The praying Jesus did, as described by Mark, is a bit different from that of Tebow in that it was not in the midst of the crowd, although it was in the midst of the game, in some respects. Jesus pulled away from people in order to gain perspective, become centered, listen, and seek direction. I would think that Tebow probably does both kinds of praying and has his alone time in prayer as well as prayer on the field. When asked about his prayer, Tebow responded that he is seeking to be led to honor God on the field whether it is a win or a loss and that he wants to be faithful and a good role model. I think that is a great prayer.

An important quest is to determine the purpose for a prayer. If we focus on communion with God, then prayer is appropriate and good any time and in any place. The method you use may vary, based on your personality and situation. Tebow's method simply made others aware of his communication with God. His would not be everyone's method. But if the purpose in praying in that fashion is to draw attention to ourselves without desired content, even Jesus would frown upon it. For authentic prayer we need to adopt a form and setting that works of us, while at the same time we are respectful of others who have different forms of prayer.

I well remember viewing National Geographic pictures of millions of people praying in a prostrate fashion at the Mosque in India during one of the Muslim high holy days. The sheer numbers of people in prayer was quite impressive as well as was their obedience to prayer discipline.

I remember, too, a charge conference in the North Carolina mountains where a different style of prayer was demonstrated. Everyone prayed aloud along with the preacher. I was asked to lead the prayer one night and did not know if I could do that and hold my concentration. But as I prayed, I began to notice others were responding in their prayers to what I was praying. Once I adjusted to the style, it became very meaningful.

This was unlike the Quaker tradition I experienced as a child. Silence was the norm with periodic breaks for spoken words. I learned to value and trust this prayer style by observing examples of those I knew.

There are different ways of praying, but the key is to determine what it does for our own spiritual journey and how it speaks to our needs at that moment. Also, we ask if it drawing us closer to God.

To return to Mark's account of Jesus when he withdrew from the crowd to spend time in gaining perspective, we note he listened to God the Father and perhaps wrestled with the way his ministry was being received. Likely, he wondered what all of this meant at this point in his ministry. This part is clarified for us as Peter and others looked for him. When they found him, they told him, "Everyone is searching for you." But the mission and focus of Jesus was not to be popular. He had a bigger mission with a path that would take him to places his disciples and other followers did not contemplate. This prayer time for Jesus was to get a new understanding of what he was about. The path was unclear for his disciples. His statement after they found him clarified it for them. He told them, "Let's go on teaching and getting the word out. That is what I was sent to do."

Jesus had needed alone time to seek clarity and perspective for his life and for his journey. I believe prayer time for him was essential for him to remember who he was. Prayer time also allowed him to gain perspective on the events occurring around him at that moment. In this part of the Gospel Jesus clearly does not want publicity, for fear his message might be misunderstood or his time to present his mission might be shortened. Moving forward and remaining focused on his main task was the agenda for his prayer time.

What about you and me? If prayer time was needed and important to Jesus, is it not also for us? Maybe it is more so for us! We live in a world that is go-go 7/24 with a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately mentality. Where do you and I find time to be quiet and be with God? When do we take time to evaluate our relationships with God and others? If we do not develop discipline to regularly set time apart to commune with God, where will we get our perspective for the living of our lives? Instant reporting in the internet and the media present increasingly fewer thought out editorials on the meaning of events, on who we are, and on the meaning of our lives. We do not receive guidance for personal reflection and conjecture. Yet, I believe there is a Voice trying to get out attention.

This is the same Voice than called to young Samuel when he thought it was the priest Eli calling him; the same Voice that Jesus listened to; the same Voice that spoke to John Wesley and others during times of great social upheaval of another day. That Voice is still calling out to us. Are we listening? Do we have the discipline in our lives that enables us to listen? Our life journeys will be different if we do not listen and have time set apart to be in prayer. But how do we find time for prayer in our busy lives?

Henri Nouwen, in his book titled The Living Reminder, writes, "Spirituality is attention to the Spirit in us; it is going out to the desert . . . to pray; it is standing before the Lord with open heart and open mind; it is crying out 'Abba, Father' . . . we have fallen into the temptation of separating ministry from spirituality; service from prayer . . . our demon says we are too busy to pray . . . service and prayer can never be separated."

German Theologian, Helmut Theilecke, points out that Martin Luther prayed four hours each day so he could accomplish his gigantic labors. Theilecke wrote that to work without praying and without listening means only to grow and spread oneself upward, without striking roots and without an equivalent in the earth. Trees can grow well in rocky soil but they do this only by finding crevices in the rocks where the roots are able to penetrate deeply.

This Jesus who was born into our humanity showed us in his ministry and lifestyle the disciplines that we, as disciples, need to follow in order to thrive in our journey. Sharing in the sacred meal of the Bread and the Juice is also a time for us to unburden our hearts and to draw near to God's presence with us. As we come this morning, may we be open and attentive to God's Voice and love as it speaks to us through the mystery of the sacraments and the events of our lives. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.