

## **“The Danger of Prayer”**

**Mark 1:29-39**

**February 6, 2012**

More than any other gospel in the New Testament, Mark portrays Jesus as one who heals. Our scripture text this morning continues from last week a day, a snapshot, an example, of one day in the life of Jesus; one day early in the public ministry of Jesus. We have already seen last week that Jesus is in the synagogue of Capernaum that a man with an unclean spirit is healed. Then we move from the place of worship on the Sabbath to the home of Simon’s mother-in-law who is sick with a fever. Jesus takes her by the hand and lifts her up. The result is that by evening, the whole village is bringing the sick and those who are afflicted with demons. On the holy day of the Sabbath in worship and then in the domestic sphere of the family and then in the public realm of life as the whole village gathers, Jesus is one who heals. Jesus can heal in the various spheres of life.

We could consider the entire sermon this morning on the credibility of Jesus healing and casting out the demons. Can we believe this as modern human beings? Three years ago when we looked at this text in the gospel of Mark, I did an entire sermon on the relationship between Christianity and healing; between demon possession and illness. This morning I will simply state that yes, I do believe that Jesus as the very presence of God had the ability to heal our diseases and to bear our infirmities. Some of the earliest historical records of Jesus that we have, come from second century Jewish sources complaining about Jesus’ healing ministry as the work of the prince of darkness. Although there were times when Jesus could not heal because of unbelief and it was not a fool-proof declaration of Jesus as the Son of God; there is always still an element of faith. The miracles of healing are at best a pointer and witness to Jesus as the Son of God. And as we shall see this morning as we go a bit further, Jesus himself down plays his ministry solely defined as one who heals.

Nonetheless, I believe that we too today want Jesus to come into the midst of our homes and our domestic sphere of life and heal our diseases. Jerome preaching on this text in Bethlehem in 400 AD said:

*O that he would come to our house and enter and heal the fever of our sins by his command. For each and every one of us suffers from fever. When I grow angry, I am feverish. So many vices, so many fevers. But let us ask the apostles to call upon Jesus to come to us and touch our hand; for if he touches our hand, at once the fever flees.*

John Henry Newman had a famous prayer that went, “O Lord preserve us all the day long....until the fever of life is over, and our work is done.” The healing of Simon’s mother-in-law proclaims the power of Jesus to heal all sorts of fevers; physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual emptiness and dryness.

### **I. Sweet Hour of Prayer:**

Beginning with verse 35 is where I want us to primarily focus in this gospel text this morning. *“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”* Mark is giving us a one day snapshot in the life of

Jesus. He calls the disciples; he worships in the synagogue; he then goes to a home; and the whole village is gathered; but then Jesus withdraws and prays.

I find the New Revised Standard translation a bit troubling in the first chapter of Mark. Mark uses the Greek word *euthus*, over and over again in the first chapter. We might translate it immediately which the NRSV uses in verse 18 and verse 20. "Immediately he called them; and; they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him." But then it is as though the translators got tired of using the same word over and over again, maybe remembering the admonishment of their English composition teachers in grade school to use a variety of adverbs and adjectives. So in verse 21 the translators don't even translate the word and drop it all together. The word *euthus* appears again in verse 29 but the translation is this, "As soon as they left the synagogue." I think the word "immediately" would be better. In other words, Mark is communicating a day in the life of Jesus when bang, bang, bang. Things were happening one after another in rapid succession. Jesus was very busy; the needs of human beings were happening. Time for worship in the synagogue was interrupted and the day ends with the whole city gathered at the door wanting healing.

Jesus is the messiah, the Son of God, but he is human and he gets tired. The needs of humanity in the village of Capernaum are too much for Jesus to bear, so one reason he withdraws to pray, is for rest and getting away from the pressing needs of the world. I do think following in the footsteps of Jesus this is one reason that we need to pray. If Jesus needed to withdraw and pray, we sometimes need to do this as well.

I don't know about you, but I often think of prayer as a time of calm, rest, and healing for the soul. I didn't grow up in the church as a child, but I still tend to think of gospel hymns "Sweet Hour of Prayer" or "Standing in the Need of Prayer," or even "What a Friend we have in Jesus," because we can bring everything to God in prayer. I tend to think of prayer a bit like Jesus here of getting away from pressing needs and demands and communing with God. In recent years, I have learned to recite a phrase to calm and quiet myself before even making any sort of verbal prayers such as "I belong to God, glory be to God."

A couple of years ago the Reformed Church through the insurance plan had this program called Heart Math. We got this little bio feedback machine in which you attached the monitor to your ear and then the point was to turn the machine through quiet breathing from a red to a blue to a green. It had four levels; eventually utilizing it in quiet prayer and meditation I could get up to a level three. If anxious thoughts come to your thought and heart, the machine quickly turns to a red light.

In corporate worship, I tend to think of prayer as a time of confession and personal inventory followed by later in the service prayers of intercessions, especially praying for the needs of the sick, the dying, those who have lost loved ones and are grieving. Prayer to a certain extent is praying for comfort and healing, for me and others.

Recently, we had Jaco Haman from Western Seminary who has written a book, [The Playful Life](#). I must continually work at that since I tend to be an A-type person. Pray and play sound very similar in the English language, and actually prayer can be a sort of playfulness where we make space for God and commune with God in a joyful and restorative way.

In evangelical Christianity it is called the quiet time, and for good reason that I hope we make a part of our spiritual life. And as I mentioned last week, I think the basic DNA

of our congregation in corporate worship is more meditative and reflective; that is why we are a bit adverse to contemporary music.

I think clearly here in the first chapter of Mark this is one reason that Jesus withdrew and prayed.

## II. The Danger of Prayer:

But I don't think that is the sole or even the main purpose of Jesus withdrawing and having a time of prayer, not in the Gospel of Mark and not in the first chapter in our scripture reading.

We read that Jesus went to a "deserted place." Biblical scholars point out that Galilee at this time had a tremendous amount of harvested land. But the point is not that Jesus went into an area the size of the Mohave Dessert, but that the Greek word here is *eramon*. It is the same Greek word earlier in chapter one for the place that Jesus was cast into the wilderness or the desert. While I think the wilderness gives us Michigan people a sense of a rich green forest with many pine trees which probably is not that helpful, I think the translators use "wilderness" because Mark is clearly making allusions to the Old Testament time when the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness (or the desert) for 40 years. It was a time of testing, of struggle, of anguish in faith, and of severe temptation.

Earlier in chapter one of Mark, Jesus is thrust into the wilderness (the *eramon*) where he is tempted by Satan. Mark's account of the temptation is quite brief, but it must have been an ordeal because there were wild beasts and the angels came and waited on him. And Mark doesn't tell us that the temptation entirely came to an end. Luke tells us that Satan waited for an opportune time.

I notice throughout the Gospel of Mark that when Jesus finds himself struggling with certain decisions or directions, that Jesus turns to prayer. In the third chapter before Jesus chooses the disciples he goes up to a mountain, presumably to pray. In the sixth chapter after the disciples report everything that they have done and taught, Jesus invites them to come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while. And then in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter when Jesus about to go to the cross, Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane. The text tells us *that "he was distressed and agitated."* *"I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake."*

There is another side of prayer in the Gospel of Mark; it is not sweet hour of prayer, but a time of anguish, of wrestling and battling with the forces of the devil, of aligning one's will with that of God overcoming temptation, demons, and evil. Prayer is not so tranquil.

Here in the first chapter, the problem is that after Jesus heals a few, the whole village shows up at Jesus' doorstep. The disciples come and find Jesus, "Everyone is looking for you." Yes indeed, they don't care about Jesus or his message; they want to turn his ministry into a health dispensary or put some new wing on the local hospital and have Jesus heal everyone. But Jesus in prayer must wrestle with what is the focus and direction of his ministry and not be diverted. The result of Jesus' prayer with God: *"Let us go to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."*

We are reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians chapter 9, "*Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.*" Or Paul's words in Romans, "*I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God unto salvation.*" It is not as though Jesus does not care about the physical needs of people for he healed Simon's mother-in-law, a woman in the ancient world, which communicates his deep care for physical needs and the personhood of an individual; a woman in the ancient world is given value and dignity. But Jesus in prayer with God practices differentiation and will not allow his focus and ministry to be reduced to a social service. Similarly, the Apostle Paul will become a Jew to the Jew and a gentile to the gentile out of sensitivity and care for people and culture, but he will not allow that to deter him from preaching the truth of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Prayer is not just sweet hour of prayer but dangerous hour of prayer because then we wrestle with God and get our focus and stay attuned to our identity and purpose. There is much in our community today, even in Holland, MI that can tempt us to turn the church into just another civic organization or social service agency and forget that there is one thing that only the church can do, which is share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Prayer can bring danger, as it did with Jesus throughout the Gospel of Mark. I remember in Grand Rapids within the first few years that I arrived in the early 1990's. We live in a city neighborhood that was one of the best kept neighborhoods in the city which kept the housing values up. The national headquarters for the Dominicans was just south of our church. Some days you would see the older sisters out on the monastery grounds walking and praying the rosary. Well, the sisters announced that in a vacant building that they wanted to put a home to rehabiliate prostitutes from South Division. The neighborhood went nuts with neighborhood meetings, protest yard signs. I will never forget one man in one of the neighborhood meetings standing up, his hands shaking; his voice quivering, "I thought the sisters out walking the grounds and praying were harmless and then they came up with this crazy idea."

And of course that is just the point, that prayer is dangerous because that is when we return or maintain our true focus and purpose.

During that time I found prayer with God anything but a sweet hour of prayer but a real wrestling match because God was convicting me of the right thing to do, but I needed the courage to be able to support the Roman Catholic sisters. I think more than once I asked Joyce, "Do we still have the suitcases down in the basement from the move because I don't know how long we are going to be here." The eventual outcome was that the sisters developed a homeless shelter for women and children, and as far as I know there never was any disruption to the neighborhood or loss of real estate values. And sometimes for the midweek children's program Christmas project we came bearing gifts from the children of the church at the homeless shelter.

I guess I can mention this on the day of the Super Bowl. A few weeks ago on a Monday when Joyce and I take a day off, we were sitting in a restaurant having lunch. It was one of these places with the TV's going completely around the restaurant and they were replaying all the NFL playoff games. On one channel the show was called "Monday Morning Quarterback," and they claimed "a show where we break down everything from Sunday's game." I said to Joyce, "It is an interesting culture; they want to keep us entertained; they want to fill us with diversions so we never deal with the real

stuff of life.” “The real stuff of life? God? What are we doing here? Do we have a purpose and a meaning?” The crowds were searching for Jesus, maybe so they could have a miracle of healing, and not really because they wanted a real encounter with Jesus, but at least they were searching.

Prayer is dangerous not only because we come face to face with God, but also with the demons within. That is one reason that so many in our contemporary culture keep busy, fill up their lives with almost anything, so that they don't have to be alone with God and oneself. Prayer is when the demons within, are silenced by Jesus, sometimes coming out with great anguish and maybe a shriek, and we are renewed in purpose, conviction, and faith in God.

I find it just a little comforting that prayer is not always a sweet hour of prayer but something that is filled with trial and turmoil before God; because in times of decision and wrestling with what is the right thing to do, I have rarely found my times with God very easy and tranquil.

#### Conclusion:

Again and again in the gospels the promise is given that God will answer our prayers; for example in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark: “*So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*” (Mark 11:24) We struggle with unanswered prayer, and maybe we can address that at another time. But perhaps our problem is not with unanswered prayer but answered prayer. Alone in the wilderness with God, we know to whom we belong and what we are to do. And that so often is the difficult and the dangerous part of our discipleship and our worship.

The good news is that Jesus has gone before us, the one who was tempted like we are, yet without sin. “*Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*” (Hebrews 4:16)