

## **Meadowbrook Congregational Church**

**February 8, 2009**

**“Where Prayer Leads”**

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### **Mark 1:29-39**

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

A colleague of mine was speaking with me last December. He sounded just awful. "Things are really getting to me," he said. "I am dealing with some really difficult people here and I am having trouble getting anything done. I feel as if I am putting out fires here and there every day without working in any organized or thoughtful way. It doesn't seem like I am accomplishing anything important. And very little that I am doing feels spiritual. I am trying to gear up for all of the Advent and Christmas services but it is difficult to feel inspired. I've just about had it with the church!"

All of this sounded very serious so I asked my colleague if he was getting any support or doing anything for his own self-care. "Yes," he replied. "I am going on retreat for a week in January. I can't wait. Another colleague recommended the place so I thought I would give it a try. I am looking forward to some rest and relaxation and a time to recharge my batteries. It will be great not to have any obligations for five days. It will be good to get away from it all and return home with a different perspective." All of that sounded wonderful and I hung up the phone thinking that if my colleague could only survive to his time of retreat he might see things with a more positive view.

Last week I spoke with him again. I was interested in hearing how he was doing and how the retreat went. I figured that if it went well for him then I might be interested in going there myself one day. I was surprised at his response. "Horrible," he said. "I would never go again and won't recommend it to my worst enemy. I felt like I was in prison! They got us up every day at 6:00 a.m. for worship and you know me Art, I love to sleep in. And you couldn't even take a nap in the afternoon. Mealtimes were on certain rigid hours. The food was sparse and what food there was can only be described as exceptionally healthy. My stomach was growling all week. Lights were out at 9:30 p.m. I didn't bring my flashlight so I couldn't even stay up reading for pleasure. And every day was organized and every hour programmed. We had to be in this room at this time. We had to remain silent for this certain period. We had to read this book or write this paper before this hour. There was no time for enjoyable conversation with others, laughter and sharing, or free time for myself. It was anything but peaceful and relaxing. I couldn't wait to get back to the church and deal with the people and problems here!"

On the bright side my friend sounded like he had more energy and vigor after his week away. But I definitely won't be making that particular retreat center part of my future plans.

What do you think of when I mention the word prayer? Perhaps you think of the confidence inspired by the weekly repetition of The Lord's Prayer and the inspiration gained by joining in the words repeated by the faithful for centuries. You might think of the blessing offered at mealtime and the assurance that comes with the gathering family and friends. Your thoughts might run to a bedtime prayer when in quiet trust you pray "the Lord your soul to keep." Maybe you think of our church prayer chain and the words of intercession that are offered daily for the strength, comfort and healing of others in the difficulties of their life. Quite possibly you think of prayer as source of healing itself. In prayer one is supposed to find comfort and rest, medicine for the soul. In prayer one is healed so that they might face the tasks of life in a stronger way. Or could it be that when you hear the word prayer you think of solitude and quiet. Prayer is a peaceful time away from the noise and commotion of life. It is a time to reflect peacefully on the issues and burdens that one carries in life.

All of those ideas of prayer may work for us but it doesn't seem that prayer necessarily worked that way for Jesus, at least according to the Gospel of Mark. Indeed it seemed at times as if prayer for Jesus was anything but quiet and peaceful. Prayer was kind of a challenging activity, something that put him in peril and at risk.

In Mark, we read at the very beginning that following his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days for meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Of course we know that little excursion was anything but calm and peaceful. Jesus was tempted there. He was forced to struggle with his own identity in terms of serving God or celebrating his own power and accomplishment. Only after doing battle with the forces of darkness was Jesus able to really begin his ministry.

Toward the end of Mark's gospel we find Jesus at prayer and meditation. This time the scene was Gethsemane. Again this was not a time of peace and comfort. Jesus prayed with great distress and anguish. He struggled with what appears to be his

fate. It was only after wrestling with the very will of God that Jesus emerged with the courage to face the cross.

In this morning's gospel reading, we heard the story of Jesus' power of healing. This time Jesus has healed the mother-in-law of Simon who was sick in bed with a fever. Upon hearing of this miracle, everyone in town brought someone to Jesus to be healed. He must have been busy for all the rest of the day, healing diseases and driving out demons.

Almost lost in the story is what happened next. Very early the next day, Jesus got up before anyone else and sneaked away for a time of retreat. Our reading said it was a solitary place, another version says a lonely place, and still another calls this place "the wilderness." In a strange way it is almost like the temptation story all over again. Alone, Jesus began to pray. But Simon and the rest of the disciples found him and interrupted his quiet. They told him that he should come back and revel in his newfound glory and popularity. Once again Jesus encountered another option for his future. But Jesus answered that it his call was not to stay there, signing autographs and posing for photos with his admiring fans. It was best to move to other towns and preach the Gospel to those who have not yet heard its good news.

I was struck this week that while we may see prayer as a very serene and calming activity, Jesus found prayer always to be the catalyst of struggle. It was the place where the forces of human selfishness, popularity, ambition, and success clashed with what he knew to be the intention of God. Prayer did not lead Jesus to a tomorrow that was easy and peaceful. Prayer led Jesus to places that required a serious commitment to the gospel and dedication to build the world that God intended for all humanity. Prayer led Jesus to places where he would have to be faithful to his own calling, even in difficult circumstances.

Henri Nouwen writes about prayer and solitude in his book *The Way of the Heart*. Nouwen writes of the solitude of prayer not as a relaxing, self-affirming experience, but rather as a "furnace of transformation." "Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter - the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self."

Later in the book, Nouwen writes that the early church fathers wrote to "pray always." The literal translation of these words was "come to rest." Hence we may get the idea that our times of prayer should lead us to contentment and bliss. However Nouwen writes, "that the rest we find in prayer has nothing to do with the absence of conflict or pain. It is a rest in God in the midst of a very intense daily struggle."

I read an account this week of a man visiting a mission outpost in Samoa. Late in the afternoon he sat on the deck of his dormitory, watching the young people of the village engaged in all sorts of sports: rugby, soccer, and cricket. The energy and level of competition was impressive. Then he heard the clear peal of a single bell. Suddenly all of the activity ceased and the participants dispersed to their homes. "What was going on," he asked. It seemed too early for the evening meal. His host told him, "They are returning to their homes and families for the time of prayer. It is a daily event here in the village and all activity must cease." The village was quiet for around 30 minutes. Then, gradually at first, the young people returned. Soon the playfield was full again with the noise of competition.

Prayer is like that. It is a time of withdrawal, a time to seek sanctuary, a time to get away from the maddening crowd, and a time to be with God. But prayer leads us to return to life, back into the field, right into the middle of the crowd, again to be with God.

Where does prayer lead? We might certainly be surprised! Certainly not to a place where answers are crystal clear, comfort abounds, and the heart is filled with contentment in one's self. No, prayer takes us to a place where we must confront the temptations of the world. It takes us to a place where we must face the evils of our day. It takes us to a place where we must be honest about our real self.

Prayer is a struggle between the alluring callings of the world and the way in which God desires for us to be. And where prayer leads is to the work of constant commitment and steady faithfulness.