

Sermon 15 March 2015, Leith Valley Presbyterian Church

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Scripture reading: Mark 1:14-39

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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 neighbouring 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.

Sermon

Some years ago Dave and I were in a pretty bad place. We have two sons, now grown up. At that time, our older son was just entering adolescence, and he was testing us in a whole lot of ways. It was really hard. In addition, Dave was struggling at work. Last week I talked about Dave getting a lot of opposition at work because of an ethics class he was teaching, and that was happening at this time I’m talking about now. Unlike me, when Dave is stressed he loses weight, and we can look back and see how thin and sick he looked because he was feeling so unappreciated and stressed at work.

I was dealing with a different kind of stress. I had finished seminary. I was a candidate for ordination as a Presbyterian minister, and I knew I couldn’t possibly pursue ordination with a son who was wearing me out and a husband who was pretty deeply depressed. I had no idea how long these two stresses would last, and I wondered what in the world I was doing with my life.

Our church began to offer some contemplative prayer events, Sunday morning classes where we learned various kinds of contemplative prayer, and all day Saturday quiet day retreats. I started going along to them because I thought I might find some peace there. The woman who led the classes and the retreats was an excellent teacher, and she taught us various kinds of silent prayer: The prayer of examen, where you look back on the day and see where God was present. Lectio Divina, where you meditate on a passage of scripture in four steps. Centering prayer, where you pick a sacred word, and you keep coming back to it in silence.

I loved contemplative prayer. I just loved it. I found some measure of peace in praying silently, so I could return to those stresses of everyday life that were so hard.

I want to compare and contrast my experience with contemplative prayer with Jesus’ experience in Mark chapter 1.

Jesus is having a very busy time. Our passage begins right after Jesus’ baptism, and Mark describes Jesus’ arrival in Galilee. He then finds people to be his disciples and calls them.

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As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Then we have a description of a day so busy I can’t imagine where Jesus found the energy for it. I thought my life was exhausting with a rebellious son and a stressed husband. Listen to the busyness of this day in Jesus’ life.

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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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.

The passage then makes a giant shift. I want you to hear that shift:

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

I can so imagine how deeply Jesus needed that quiet time of prayer, that time of relationship with his Father in heaven. After that incredibly busy day, he needed a sense of peace. Because of my experience when I learned contemplative prayer, I can so identify with this moment. The activities swirl around us. There’s one demand after another. We manage to meet those demands, and in Jesus’ case I imagine he met those demands with

deep joy. But the demands are tiring and overwhelming, and we just need a sense of peace and sense of returning to the center.

I particularly want you to notice the verses that follow.

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 neighbouring 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.

Simon and the other disciples find him off alone praying, and they say to him that he needs to come back to the village because there are more people there who want to see him and probably receive healing from him. But Jesus basically says no, I have other priorities. I need to go to other villages and proclaim the gospel there "for this is what I came out to do."

Jesus' time alone with his father gave him a renewed sense of his purpose, of what he came to earth to do. His purpose wasn't to go back and continue to minister to the same people he healed yesterday. His purpose was to go on and encounter more people who needed to hear the gospel and experience the power of God.

That what was missing in my experience of contemplative prayer. I came to it with a deep need for peace. I wanted to be able to survive my life. There's never any shame in bringing our needs to God, and in effect that's what I was doing when I engaged in contemplative prayer. "I need your help, God. I'm desperate." That's a good prayer. But it's not enough.

This was brought home to me a few years after I started attending those contemplative prayer events. I came across an article in a magazine entitled "Prayer as Availability to God," and it changed my whole perspective on prayer. Prayer has many purposes, and I had been neglecting one of them. My prayers had been "prayer as desperation for help," which is fine and good. But prayer also needs to be "prayer as availability to God."

We see that in Mark 1. Jesus, when he spent time in prayer with his Father, got a renewed sense of purpose. When the disciples found him, he was able to say no to them. They said, the people want you to come back to town and be with them some more. He said, no, that's not my purpose. How many times have you felt pressure to please the people around you when you know that's not what you're called to do? Jesus, because of his time in prayer with his Father, was able to say no, I need to do something else.

A part of our prayer life needs to be prayer as availability to God's purposes for our lives. What does this look like in practice?

There's an insert in your bulletin with a prayer exercise for this week, based on the idea of prayer as availability to God. Would you get out that insert now? You'll see some ideas for praying your availability to God.

Pray your availability to God

With words, perhaps like this:

- Jesus, I have many needs and concerns (list them) but I also want to tell you I'm available for you to guide me and use me.
- I love you, dear Lord, and I want to follow you. Please give me discernment and wisdom about your will.
- Loving God, my life is yours, not mine. I belong to you as your beloved child. Be a light to my path and a lamp to my feet

With your body, perhaps like this:

- Cup your hands, facing upwards, as a symbol of catching God's love and guidance.
- Stand up tall, raise your arms over your head, as a symbol of being strong and available to God
- Kneel, as a symbol of submission to God
- Lay flat on your face, as a symbol of submission to God

You will undoubtedly be able to think of more ways to phrase your prayer. And you may be able to think of more ways to use your body to reflect your availability. Let me just comment on the kneeling option. Some of you will know about John Stott. He was an English minister who wrote a ton of books and was an excellent speaker. I admired him so much. I heard him say one time that every morning he knelt beside his bed to pray. He viewed kneeling as an integral part of his morning prayers because it indicated his desire to submit to God's plan for his day and for his life.

Let me go back to my own story. You may be interested to hear what happened after I started praying my availability to God. I was ordained as a Presbyterian minister and served as a half-time associate minister in a church in Seattle for 7 years. All that time, I wrote books in my other half time. I felt a clear call to go into teaching, so I earned a PhD in my early 50s. Then I applied for teaching jobs all over the United States, plus one job here in Dunedin, and guess where I ended up.

Throughout that process I've been praying my availability to God. Sometimes the prayers are about big things. "What, God, you want me to apply for PhD programmes at 51? Really?"

“God, I’m available to you, but I didn’t realize that being available would take me to New Zealand! But I’m willing.” “Okay, I’ve finished writing that book. I’m available to write another one. Do you want me to?”

But often the prayers of availability relate to what might be considered small things. “I know what’s on the schedule for today. Help me to be your person as I do those things. Help me to be faithful to you as I do them.” “Guide me in my day because I don’t know exactly what’s happening today.”

The last three months have been interesting. For those of you who weren’t here last week to hear me talk about my medical adventures of the past three months, I’ll just say that it’s been one thing after another related to my right knee and my liver. For more than two of those months, I have known I would be preaching this sermon on availability to God. Does being ill change our call to be available to God? No. But it’s certainly complicated.

I have found myself praying like this. “Oh, God help me. Heal my knee. Heal my liver. Give me strength to do my exercises. Give me patience with the slow pace of healing. Help me not to get discouraged. . . . Oh, and yes, I am available to you today. Guide me into your path.” It has required huge discipline to look beyond my pain and struggle to be open to God’s purposes in my life. Some days I succeed, some days I don’t. But the goal stays there, and the goal is a good thing.

Let’s go back briefly to the story about Jesus going off to pray alone. He had an incredibly busy day, he withdrew to pray the next morning, and he received a renewed sense of his purpose from the time with his Father. I don’t want you to think that happens every time we pray. That would set you up for frustration. But it does happen sometimes we pray, and we need to watch for those times. And sometimes God speaks to us as we pray in other ways than “go do this.” Sometimes we receive a renewed sense of how much God loves us. Sometimes we receive a renewed sense of how much God loves someone in our life. Sometimes our availability to God in prayer results in forgiving someone or having more energy for the tasks of the day. Our job is to be available and open to whatever God wants to give us and however God wants to lead us.

This is a basic building block for mission. We want to do God’s will on earth, and expressing our openness to that is basic and foundational.

In the past six weeks we’ve had several sermons on prayer. I want to end this sermon with a review of the series. Topics:

God loves us. Richard preached about this foundational idea. We don’t make ourselves available to a mean God who’s counting our actions to see if we’re worthy. We make

ourselves available to a loving God who literally could not love us any more than he already does. This love is a foundation for all prayer for mission.

Honesty before God, Psalm 73. Helen preached about how coming into God's presence in prayer gives us the answers to our questions.

Declarative prayer. Helen preached about being bold in prayer about the things we know to be God's will.

Attentiveness determines our path. Ivan preached on this.

Spiral of knowledge, obedience, fruit, and more knowledge. Last week I preached about Paul's prayer in Colossians 1. He prays they will gain knowledge of God's will, so they can lead lives worthy of God, bearing fruit, and increasing in the knowledge of God. When we know something about God's will, as we act on it, we will bear fruit and gain further knowledge of God. We should be praying for this pattern in our own lives and in the lives of others.

Today as I talked about availability to God, in a sense I'm taking a step back and addressing a foundation for the spiral I talked about last week as well as the declarative prayer Helen talked about. A basic, foundational step for engaging with God's purposes in the world is to tell God we're available to him. We can do that because of his great love for us.

I'm going to close with the first few verses of Psalm 103. This is the God we are making ourselves available to. This is the God we approach in prayer in a variety of ways. I invite you to do something with your body as I read these verses – open your hands, kneel, lift your arms over your head – whatever feels right.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

