

February 7, 2016

Praying for a Change

Mark 1:35-39

Opening Words: Once again, we find ourselves today in the gospel of Mark. Let me remind you again of its background. It was written in the year AD 68 by John Mark, who was a close associate of Peter. For this reason some have called this gospel Peter's Gospel. It was written to the believers in Rome who were suffering under the hand of Nero, who blamed them for the famous fire in Rome in the year AD 64. The gospel was written to remind them that suffering was all part of the Christian experience. We find ourselves today in the first chapter of Mark, verses thirty-five through thirty-nine. Let me call this message *Praying for a Change*.

Mark 1:35-39 ³⁵Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. ³⁶Simon and his companions went to look for him, ³⁷and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" ³⁸Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." ³⁹So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

The founder of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland was John Knox. He died on November 24, 1572. Historians tell us that as he lay on his death bed he asked his wife, thirty-two years his junior, to read the prayer in John 17. You remember that sacred chapter. Jesus is about to be arrested, so Jesus prays for himself, the disciples and all believers. As he heard Jesus's prayer, Knox seemed to forget his own weakness. Suddenly he began to pray. He prayed for his fellowmen. He prayed for the ungodly who had thus far rejected the gospel. He prayed for the recent converts. He prayed for protection for the Lord's servants, many of whom were facing persecution. He prayed a word of thanksgiving. As Knox prayed, his spirit went home to be with the Lord. The man of whom Queen Mary had said, "*I fear his prayers more than I do the armies of my enemies,*" ministered through prayer until the moment of his death.

What is it about prayer that makes it so powerful? One of the great privileges I have in the ministry is praying with people. I have prayed with people at some incredible times. Both the best and worst in life seem to lead us to prayer. I have prayed with young couples who have just welcomed a child into the world. I have prayed with young couples who have lost their baby. I have prayed with couples who have just decided to unite in marriage. I have prayed with people who have decided to end their marriage. I have prayed with families who are waiting for a loved one to pass. I have prayed with families during a long surgery. I have prayed before church dinners and meetings. I have prayed for a sick pet and the blessing of a home. I have prayed early on Easter morning and late on Christmas Eve. I have prayed for those who are incarcerated and those who are miles off serving our country. I have prayed for strangers and for the

people I love the most. I have asked people to pray for me when I confess my own human limitations. What is it about prayer that makes it so powerful? Martin Luther said, *"If I should neglect prayer but a single day, I should lose a great deal of the fire of faith."* So today I want to talk about prayer.

In this morning's scripture lesson we find Jesus praying. According to the text it is Sunday, the first day of the week. Physically, emotionally and spiritually, Jesus is spent. Saturday had been a long day. We will never know how long he taught in the synagogue. We will never know how many people were healed that day. We will never know how many demons were exorcised. What we do know is that Jesus was tired, but the population of Capernaum was energized about Jesus. Verse thirty-five says Jesus got up the next day extra early to pray. We do not know the content of his prayer, but it must have been something special. He decides to leave his popularity in Capernaum and teach in other synagogues throughout Galilee.

However, there is more to this story than discovering Jesus' itinerary. It models for us the importance of prayer. Prayer warriors understand the next line. Prayer changes the one who prays. You may think you are changing the final outcome, but you are really changing yourself. When you pray, you change your heart. We are going to look at three things. First, prayer changes your agenda, because prayer takes time. Second, prayer changes your heart. It makes you more sensitive to human need. Third, prayer changes your relationship with God. My goal is simple. I want to enhance your prayer life so you can tap into your full potential as a disciple of Jesus Christ. So if you are ready to become a prayer warrior, say, **"Amen!"**

Prayer changes your agenda.

Prayer changes your agenda. Look at the text with me. Verse thirty-five says, *"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."* In other words, Jesus had a plan. He didn't wait until an opportunity presented itself. Jesus was very intentional about prayer. He got up early and went to a private place to pray. Are you intentional in your prayer life, or does prayer just happen in your life when an opportunity presents itself? Why is this point so important? It is my experience that people find time for things that are important to them. There is never time for things that are not important.

Years ago when I was a seminary student, Christmas fell on a Sunday. I remember that year clearly because it was the first Christmas morning I wouldn't be home. I served a little country church near Danville, Kentucky and duty called. I preached on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning. I planned to leave for home after Sunday morning worship. My parishioners worried about me driving home. They lived in Garrard County and rarely left their little corner of the world. They saw northeastern Ohio as another planet. They asked for a short service on Christmas morning so I could get on the road, because they didn't want me to get home too late. It was about 450 miles. One of the men surprised me by filling up my car during the service, and I drove from Danville,

Kentucky to Akron. When I got to Akron I needed a break and some gas. The only gas station that was open was manned by a hairy young fellow with worn-out jeans. He was wearing a shirt that looked like something stolen from Goodwill, and a large multicolored wrinkled hoodie. I walked in and said, *"It stinks to work on Christmas Day!"* He smiled and said, *"I don't care. I am off on New Year's Eve! I am having a party! I couldn't care less about Christmas, but I wouldn't miss the party."* He asked me, *"What are you doing on New Year's Eve?"* I said, *"I don't know."* I hadn't even thought about New Year's Eve. It is all a matter of priority. I am normally depressed on New Year's Eve because Christmas is over. Have you ever noticed people make time for what is important to them?

How much time do you spend in prayer? How much time do you spend at work? How much time do you spend golfing? How much time do you spend watching television? How much time do you spend watching football? If you haven't heard, the Super Bowl is today. How much time do you spend playing with the children in your life? How much time do you spend in prayer? Those questions expose your priorities in your life. We make time for the things that are important to us. Prayer changes your agenda. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Prayer changes your heart.

Prayer changes your heart. It makes you more sensitive to human need. Jesus got up early to pray. Then the disciples came and told him everyone was looking for him. He was the talk of the town! But Jesus wasn't interested in popularity. He was more concerned about others. Prayer led Jesus to the physical and spiritual needs of his world. Verses thirty-eight and thirty-nine say, *"Jesus replied, 'Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.' So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons."* That piece of scripture tells us prayer calls us to action. Martin Luther said, *"Pray as if everything depends on God, then work as if everything depends on you."* Where are your prayers leading you?

Years ago, the Salvation Army was holding their international convention and their founder, Gen. William Booth, could not attend because of physical weakness. He cabled the convention his message. Don't you wish you could hear a one word message? His one word message was: "OTHERS." That is the one message that God has sent to our world from the very beginning. The problem is, we aren't listening. We are so consumed with ourselves that we have missed it. Prayer is not about our needs and wants. Life is not about our needs and our wants. Life and prayer is about OTHERS! God is sending you to the intersection in your life where personal interest meets human need. Prayer will change your heart. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Prayer will change your relationship with God.

Prayer will change your relationship with God. That is the simplest definition of prayer I can find. Prayer cultivates a friendship with God. My mom always said you have to be a

friend to make a friend. In friendship, there is always give and take. Real friendships take time to grow. There is nothing better than an old friendship.

Have you ever noticed how much time Jesus spent praying? He is cultivating a friendship with God, an intimacy with God. Let me give you a short incomplete list of all the times in scripture that Jesus prayed.

1. Mark 1:35 Jesus prayed in the morning
2. Mark 6:46 Jesus prayed in the evening
3. Luke 5:16 Jesus heals the leper and retreats for prayer
4. Luke 6:12 Jesus prays all night and then calls the twelve
5. Luke 9:18 Jesus is praying with the disciples
6. Luke 22:41 Jesus is praying in the garden of Gethsemane

Do I have to go on? Jesus was always praying because it was a priority to him. Prayer was a priority to him because he was trying to stay connected to God. When you pray, you are cultivating a friendship with God.

I am always humbled when I say this, but when we pray, we are talking to the God of the universe. Maybe the reasons you don't feel an intimacy with God is because you haven't spent enough time cultivating your friendship with God? Prayer is not just informing God of your needs and your wants. Prayer is taking the time to development a relationship. Einstein once said, *"Physics is easy, relationships are complex"*. Take time to cultivate the most complex relationship you will ever have, your relationship with God. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

I love the story of Bill Moyers, who was a special assistant to President Lyndon B. Johnson. He was asked to say grace before a meal in the family quarters of the White House. As Moyers began praying softly, the President interrupted him with "Speak up, Bill! Speak up!" The former Baptist minister from east Texas stopped in mid-sentence and without looking up replied steadily, "I wasn't talking to you, Mr. President. I was talking to God." When was the last time you spoke to God?