

*"And There He Prayed"*

*Psalm 147; Mark 1:29-39*

*February 4, 2018*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

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News spreads quickly in a small town. Capernaum is a small town and the news is spreading quickly: "Psst, hey, d'you hear about that teacher from Nazareth?" *"The one that healed the emotionally disturbed man in the synagogue last week?"* "Yeah! Well, I heard he healed one of his student's mother-in-law!" *"No kidding! Awesome!"* "That's nothing. Last night, sick and troubled people turned out by the hundreds, right in front of the house where he's staying, and many were healed." *"Boy, Capernaum has never seen anyone like him before. Let's hope he stays awhile."*

The reading from today's Gospel continues Mark's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The teacher who speaks with authority to cast out demons is quickly in demand!

Jesus was busy. Jesus was important. Jesus had much to do. Jesus' importance is emphasized in the bracketed episodes of activity. When Mark introduces the story, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law and then the people of the town. As Mark concludes this encounter Jesus is hunted down by Simon and Jesus' other disciples. I suspect many of us have days like that, when it seems as if everyone wants us; everyone has expectations of us; everyone places demands on us. Youth respond to parents and teachers; parents to their children; professionals to their clientele; workers to their bosses; politicians to their constituents; citizens to their government. Jesus knew what it was to be in demand. So do we.

So his response is instructive. Mark tells us that in the midst of this frenzy Jesus got up early and went out to a deserted place. Jesus left the hustle and bustle to gain some

solitude, some quiet time, for himself. That by itself is nothing profound. We are deluged with messages that tell us to do the same thing. L'Oreal would have us believe "You're worth it." For years McDonalds assured us "You deserve a break today." International Coffees wants us to use their product to relax. "Stop and smell the roses" is frequently offered counsel. We devour these suggestions because stress is abundant, youth and adults have more and more pressure put on them to achieve and succeed, and life moves at cyber-speed.

But note this important difference between Jesus and some of us: "*...he got up and went out to a deserted place, **and there he prayed.***" (Mark 1:35c) In our moments of solitude are we just resting from the onslaught or plugging in to the Source of power? We in the faith community need to speak and practice what people in and outside of Christian faith believe to be true: that people of faith pray, and that prayer is the way to communicate with God, the source of our power.

[Use demonstration of a lamp that is not plugged in.]

With a lighter touch – and forgive me, for those who recall it - I retell the story of the pastor who dies and is waiting in line at the Pearly Gates. Ahead of him is a guy who's dressed in sunglasses, a loud Hawaiian shirt, leather jacket and jeans. Saint Peter addresses this guy "*Who are you, so that I may know whether or not to admit you to the Kingdom of Heaven?*"

The guy replies, "*I'm Joe Cohen, New York taxi driver.*"

St. Peter consults his list. He smiles and says, "*Take this silken robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven.*" The taxi driver goes into Heaven with his robe and staff, and it's the pastor's turn.

He stands erect and booms "*I am the Reverend Dr. Joseph Campbell, pastor of St. James' for the last forty-three years.*" St.

Peter consults his list. He says to the pastor, *“Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”*

*“Just a minute,”* says the pastor. *“That man was a taxi driver and he gets a silken robe and a golden staff. How can this be?”* St. Peter replies, *“Up here, we work by results. While you preached, people slept; while he drove, people prayed.”*

The story begs a question people often ask: *“Does prayer ‘work’?”* If by that we mean, *“Does prayer give us the thing we ask for?”* the answer is *“Maybe.”* Sometimes God’s answer is *“No”* or *“Not yet”* or *“Wait.”* However, if we mean *“Does prayer give us a relationship with God?”* the answer is absolutely *“Yes!”*

And for those who say *“I’m a woman (or man) of action”* and who worry that engaging in a prayer life is tantamount to entering the monastery, let me say clearly *“Prayer **is** action.”* It is the act of resting in God, of being in Communion with God, of receiving the grace of God. Prayer kept the Son of God, Jesus, a person of great action, focused on his true mission: proclaiming the nearness of the Realm of God. So that when his own disciples tried to domesticate him and harness him on behalf of the people of Capernaum, he said to his disciples *“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.”* Likewise, prayer keeps **us** focused on our true mission: living as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world.

The “how to” of prayer is worthy of its own sermon but let me offer a few thoughts. First, I’ve included in today’s program the prayer guide that we use on Good Friday and at other times. You will note it makes generous use of the Hymnal, so this is a perfect time to take it, and one of the Hymnals we are giving away in Dodd Hall, and begin. For the environment, I like to prepare a space and to be sure, as much as possible, that I will not be interrupted, even if only for a few

minutes. Sometimes I light a candle or play soft music. For those who would prefer to pray with others, our Monday night 7 p.m. Healing and Wholeness Worship is a weekly offering concentrated on prayer; and during Lent we will have weekly Noon services of prayer and Holy Communion. Some of you recall that Carol and I prayed individually for members of the congregation in 2017 and sent postcards sharing that fact. For those who are partnered, consider a prayer time with your partner. And if you are not an early riser like Jesus, or your early rising is filled with kids and commutation, choose a more prayer-friendly time of day.

But prayer can be as simple as being quiet at home and talking from our heart to God. It is one of the best things we can do and the heart of Protestant Christianity. We do not need a priest or intercessor but may instead go directly to God. And for those who appreciate a script, there are books of prayers and devotionals, including The Upper Room Disciplines and “The Upper Room” bimonthly booklet. One can also try a breath prayer, repeating a single word like “love” or “peace” or “hope” or “joy” in that pattern of our breathing.

If we are praying in a time of uncertain or faltering faith, we may wish to use the prayer of the father of the boy with epilepsy in Mark 9:24: *“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.”* Of course, when Jesus’ disciples asked him *“Lord, teach us to pray”* he taught them what Christians around the world call the “Our Father” or “The Lord’s Prayer.” (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-4) Pastors Hal, Dani and I, along with gifted lay leaders we can suggest, can also be of help if you would like guidance in prayer.

Prayer offers balance to the active Christian life. *“In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, **and there he prayed.**”* Let us do the same.