

A Deserted Place

Mark 1:29-39 † First United Methodist Church, Des Moines

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Jesus tells his disciples much about prayer both in his teachings and in his own practice of prayer.

From his teachings we learn that prayer flourishes in private. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus urges his followers to enter a closet to pray – to seek privacy. We cannot always be in so private a place as a closet, of course. But the guidance shapes how we pray, even in public. We close our eyes as though closing the closet door to distractions. We center ourselves in our hearts, the deep place within us where God's Holy Spirit dwells.

In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus even offers a form of prayer. We know it as The Lord's Prayer. Luke's version is shorter than Matthew's, which is the one most Christians (including us) use weekly in worship.

In this morning's reading from Mark, Jesus teaches us about prayer by his own practice of prayer. Long before the sun rises, "while it was still very dark", he goes to a deserted place to pray. He found quite a remote place, it seems, since the disciples had to hunt to find him after the sun arose.

A deserted place is an abandoned place. There is little there. We believe that is why Jesus chose to pray in such places. Deserted places have few, if any, distractions. Deserted places provide the perfect place in which to be alone with God. In such places, our prayer deepens as we move from talking to listening to simply resting silently in God's presence.

When we withdraw to a deserted place and find ourselves face to face with God, as it were, we discover more fully who God is. You would think we know clearly who God is. Surprisingly often, however, we carry around an image of God that turns out to be wildly inaccurate. Rowan Williams addresses our misunderstanding of God's nature in his forward to the recently published book *Love Unknown*. Archbishop Rowan asked a long-time friend, Ruth Burrows, to write the book for this Lenten season in the United Kingdom.

In his forward, he succinctly describes how we can confuse ourselves about who God is and what God desires of us and how that confusion can distort our lives as Christ's disciples. He writes:

"There is all the difference in the world between having a 'spiritual life' and walking in the way of Jesus...If we want to be disciples of Jesus – not interested onlookers, not more or less enthusiastic subscribers to a spiritual method, but actual disciples – we have to get used to uprooting quite a few habits of thought..."

He continues: "The heart of the problem....is in the way we inherit false and enslaving pictures of God. We receive and internalize the idea that God is jealous of us, suspicious of us, out to make our lives difficult – so we become in turn jealous and suspicious, and make our own lives and those of all around us difficult. We act as if we had to impress God..."

"But the God of the Bible, and above all the God of Jesus, is not our rival or our examiner or our persecutor but our lover. There is nothing we can do to impress him or put

him in our debt. If we start from the assumption that we have to do these things, we shall become either deludedly arrogant or despairing....When we are empty of our fantasies about goodness or holiness or integration or however we phrase it, we can just allow God to be who he is...the one who wants to live in us and pray in us, so that we – silenced and humbled by his generosity – can come to life again, without anxiety, without arrogance, without despair.”
(*Love Unknown*, pp. ix-xi)

Jesus withdraws to a deserted place because that is an ideal place to rest with God and to “allow God to be who he is... so that ...can come to life again.”

Jesus needs to withdraw to rest in God’s presence often. Mark’s example is just the first of many we read in the gospels. The frequency of Jesus’ practice of withdrawing to a deserted place teaches us that it is important for us to practice such prayer regularly.

Though we also learn from Jesus’ example in Mark that the regular practice of such prayer is not for us. When we encounter the God who loves us so fully in prayer we do, as Archbishop Rowan says, “come to life again..” Jesus does as well.

Yet, we should notice that, once the disciples finally find him in his deserted place, he doesn’t sit around basking in the renewed zest for life which being in God’s presence has given him. He does not – so to speak – settle back into a spiritual hammock of satiation and satisfaction. He springs into action.

He sets out to do “what I came to do”, to proclaim the message of God’s Good News in neighboring towns and throughout Galilee and to confront evil wherever he finds it, creating healing and wholeness in its place. In waiting for the Lord in a deserted place, he renews his strength and mounts up with wings as eagles to carry out the ministry God gave him.

His time with God brings him to life again for others. For this is the fundamental lesson he wanted to sear into the consciousness of his followers in all his teaching – God’s way is the way of love and thus it is the way that cares for others.

In our deserted places, God brings us to life again for others, not for ourselves. As Jesus taught and showed us, it is in living generously for others we discover life and life abundant at that. In the deserted places of prayer, where we simply rest in the presence of God, we discover the inexhaustible generosity of God’s love for us. We discover God’s generous love seeks us all the time, not just when we withdraw to a deserted place to be with God. It is the overwhelming abundance of God’s love for each of us which silences and humbles us as we rest in God.

And it is that abundant, awesome love which brings us to life again “without anxiety, without arrogance, without despair” and empowers us to do the ministry God calls us to do. Renewed in strength, we mount up with wings like eagles to practice “the way of Jesus” by sharing, with everyone through our words and our actions, the love God has entrusted us through Jesus Christ.

In the name of the One God, Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.