

## **Message for February 7, 2021**

### **Mark 1:21-37**

Every once in a while a person tells a story that even years later sticks in my mind. I remember one such story that was told by Cam Taylor when he was the minister at Knox Oakville when I was a teenager.

At the time of the story Cam was in university and spending his summer working as a waiter in the dining car of a CPR passenger train. It was a very busy day and the dining car was full of hungry passengers. The food orders were flying into the kitchen and it was obvious that the cook was finding it harder and harder to keep up. The pressure kept building until the cook finally lost it. As Cam told it, he walked in with an order for an outside cut of roast beef and right before his astonished eyes, the cook stuck the tray holding the meat out the window of the moving train, carved off a slice and then screamed "There, you have an outside cut!"

The poor cook had obviously reached the end of his rope and couldn't take the stress any longer. He experienced a total loss of control but what of us, do we ever feel like that cook? Stress of course is an unavoidable part of life and there is even more stress today for many people as the pandemic continues. Being human as he most certainly was, stress was also a part of Jesus' life but unlike us at times, Jesus knew how to handle it. Today's passage tells us how.

It had been a long tiring Saturday for Jesus. The day had begun with his leading the worship service in the local synagogue and part way through it he had been interrupted by a man who was obviously ill. Even though it was the Sabbath and so all work including healing was strictly forbidden, Jesus had showed no hesitation and healed the man. Jesus probably felt tired and wanted to rest after the service but when he got to the place where he was staying, he discovered that Peter's mother-in-law was sick in bed. Jesus however showed no hesitation and healed her too. The day went on from there until it was time to go to bed but then what happened?

There was a commotion outside. News of what Jesus had done that morning had spread far and wide and now it seemed as if everyone was there,

demanding a cure for either themselves or their dearly beloved. I wonder if Jesus in his humanity wondered if that day would ever end but even so, he did what was asked of him.

Now after such a long day who would have been surprised if Jesus had wanted to sleep in a bit the next morning, but what did he do? Long before anyone else was up and moving, Jesus got up, went off, found a quiet spot and started to pray. And Jesus stayed there praying for quite some time too, at least until Peter and the other disciples showed up looking for him. It was obvious that Peter was more than a little bit surprised by Jesus' behaviour but even if Peter didn't understand why Jesus did this, we certainly do. Prayer wasn't just an option for Jesus; it was an absolute necessity. It was prayer that gave Jesus the strength to preach, teach and heal. It was prayer that enabled Jesus to cope with the many people who came to him with their insistent demands for help. It was prayer that ensured that Jesus never experienced a total loss of control like the poor cook I mentioned earlier. Prayer was the foundation upon which Jesus' entire ministry and spiritual life was built. And as it was with Jesus, so it is with us; having a strong vital prayer life is crucial to our lives as Christ's disciples.

I remember well a devotion I heard decades ago when I was at a meeting of the presbytery of Lindsay-Peterborough. Since Lindsay-Peterborough is such a large presbytery, it met during the day rather than at night as it could take some people a couple of hours to get to the meeting. The meeting always began with a devotion and the one that morning was given by an older Scottish minister. In it he asked us if we had taken the time to pray that morning before setting off for the meeting. He said that if we hadn't, then we had lost sight of our priorities. He noted too that far too many ministers say that they are too busy for prayer, Bible reading and other 'spiritual' activities, thinking that there are far more important things to be done and more productive ways to use their time. He insisted however that prayer is absolutely crucial and that it must be a priority since it is the foundation upon which everyone's ministries rest. He insisted too that there is already enough stress in life and that neglecting prayer just makes it worse. And he was on to something too.

In a conversation I had with a woman years ago, she asked me point blank, why pray, what's the point? She said that sometimes we pray to praise God and

tell him how great he is, but doesn't God already know how wonderful he is? We pray too to confess our sins but doesn't God already know all about them? Or what about thanking God, she asked? Doesn't God already know if we are grateful and if so, for what? It's the same with making requests as well. Doesn't God already know what is on our minds? Quite reasonably she asked; if God already knows everything, and he does, then what's the point of praying?

A little bit to her surprise I told her that she was right; God already knows about our sins, hopes, fears, dreams and needs. But the point of prayer however is not to tell God what he already knows, because we do not pray for God's sake we pray for our own. To put it simply, regular prayer is our way of keeping in touch with the divine. And prayer really isn't hard either. It's like in this story.

An elderly man's daughter asked the local minister to visit her sick father. When the minister arrived, he found the frail man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows; there was also an empty chair sitting beside him. The minister assumed that the old gentleman had been told about his visit and that the chair was for him.

"It looks like you were expecting me!" the minister said.

"No, who are you?" came the reply.

The minister apologized, introduced himself and then explained; "I saw the empty chair and I assumed that you knew I was coming."

"Oh yes, the chair", said the man. "Would you mind closing the door?"

Puzzled, the minister did as he was asked.

"I have never told anyone this, not even my daughter, but for most of my life I never really knew how to pray. I used to hear the minister at church talk about prayer but it went right over my head. I abandoned any attempt at prayer until one day my best friend said to me 'Johnny, prayer is just having a conversation with Jesus'. My friend then suggested that I just sit in a chair and place an empty chair in front of me. 'Imagine', my friend said 'that Jesus is sitting on it. Then just speak to him in the same way you're doing with me right now.'"

"I tried it and I liked it so much that I do it a couple of times a day. I'm careful though. If my daughter caught me talking to an empty chair, she would think I am crazy!"

This is a nice, sentimental story but it also cuts to the heart of what prayer is and what it involves; prayer is simply having a conversation with God sharing whatever may be on our minds, no more, no less. There are many different ways of praying but ultimately it doesn't matter how we pray, when we pray or where we pray; the important thing is that we do so. It was prayer that gave Jesus the strength to do what he had to do and so it is with us. It is through prayer that God guides, comforts, strengthens, and sustains us. It is prayer too that helps us to cope with the stresses that we all sometimes experience. Is prayer an unnecessary and unproductive use of time? Far from it; it is the foundation upon which the rest of the day and indeed our very spiritual lives rest. The time we spend in prayer in fact may well be the most important of the entire day.