

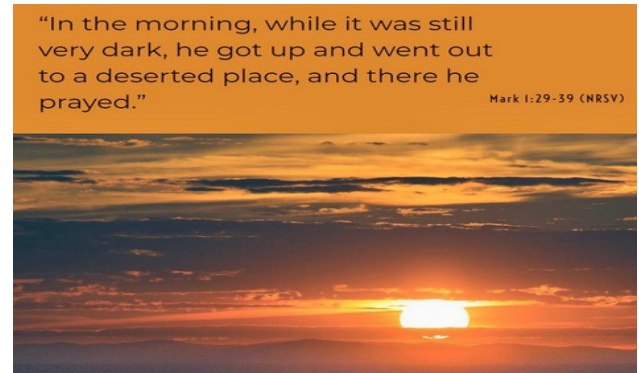
Reflection for Epiphany 5B

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Sunday, February 4th, 2024

Priority of Prayer Between Preaching and Healing

For most of our lives, we have been told that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. As its name suggests, it breaks the overnight fasting period. It replenishes our supply of fuel to boost our energy levels and alertness, while also providing other essential nutrients required for good health. Many studies have shown the health benefits of eating breakfast.



Did you have breakfast this morning?

I confess that on Sunday mornings I only drink my pot of English Breakfast tea before leaving for church, and then enjoying a few cups of Sharon's great coffee before our service.

Did you have time to pour yourself a glass of juice, brew a pot of tea or coffee?

Did you have time to eat before coming to church? Maybe a bowl of cereal, a slice of toast?

No problem...you could have had breakfast while driving here; you could have unwrapped a "breakfast bar" ~ granola or perhaps a Nutri-Grain bar ~ and eat it on your way. It may not be the most nourishing meal, but it's convenient, and that seems to be what people want most ~ convenience!

In today's world, it's easy to become hooked on the "quick and easy" approach to almost everything. (adapted from "The Lure of Convenience" Our Daily Bread, January 22, 2002)

But it's dangerous to base our spiritual life on what is most convenient, and that includes taking time to pray.

This morning's Gospel reading completes a very busy day in Jesus' life. It reveals that in the midst of teaching, travelling, healing, and preaching, Jesus never allowed the pace of life to deter Him from spending time in prayer.

Mark wrote, "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." (v 35) (The Lure of Convenience" Our Daily Bread, January 22, 2002)

This shows us how important prayer was to Jesus: he lost sleep to pray, and that he needed solitude and time to replenish. We see that Jesus' strength was renewed and he was ready to continue his ministry, proclaiming God's message. (v 38)

What is prayer?

It is how we communicate with God. Prayer is simply conversation with God, and according to the late theologian, Marcus Borg, there are two forms of individual prayer ~ verbal and nonverbal, prayers spoken out loud and prayers said silently, meditatively, contemplatively.

(from *The God We Never Knew*, pg. 122-126)

As a child I remember thinking and feeling that God was out there somewhere, a distant being. I only knew about verbal prayer, usually asking God for something. Sometimes I asked for help. I said grace before meals, I prayed for protection at bedtime and to bless my family. I especially prayed for my twin sister ~ she got into trouble a lot when we were little! I learned The Lord's Prayer by rote, as we all did, and memorized Psalm 23 and 121, all three of which I still include in my daily prayers.

Verbal prayer addresses God with words, and its central quality is that it is addressing God as "You," having a conversation with Him and nurturing your relationship with Him. (MB Ibid)

Nonverbal prayer involves learning how to become silent inside. It works in a different way and it has many forms – using images from Scripture; some employing a mantra, a word or short phrase repeated over and over again, the most well-known being praying the rosary. (MB Ibid)

Some forms of nonverbal prayer involve sitting silently and watching whatever arises in one's mind. Mother Teresa said, "We need silence to be alone with God, to speak to him, to ponder his words deep in our hearts. We need to be alone with God in silence to be renewed and transformed. Silence gives us a new outlook on life. In it we are filled with the energy of God himself."

I call it **Stillness**, centring myself, finding perspective, recognizing my authentic Christian self, and cultivating a quiet heart.

The cumulative effect of praying to God as the "You" in our midst, whether verbal or nonverbal, is that our sense of God, life, and self, begins to change. Prayer transforms those who pray.

How each of us individually connects with God is unique. A helpful thought is this from John Bunyan, author of the Christian allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*: "When you pray, rather let your heart be without words than your words without heart."

This brings to mind a quote about an anagram I found recently: "A man prayed, and at first he thought prayer was talking. But then he became more and more quiet until, in the end, he realized that prayer is listening." ~ Interesting! The same letters that make the word 'silent' also make the word 'listen.'

Prayer changes things. It doesn't necessarily solve all our problems, or convince God to give us what we want.

If the request is wrong, God says, "No."
If the timing is wrong, God says, "Slow."
If you are wrong, God says, "Grow."
But if the request is right, the timing is right,
and you are right, then God says, "Go!" (Bill Hybels)

God delights in being a part of our lives. Do you know why he often doesn't answer prayer right away? Because he wants to talk to us, and sometimes that's the only way to get us to stay and talk to him.

But prayer takes time. Many people today are overscheduled, overworked, overstressed and thus overwhelmed.

You might be thinking, "I am just too busy."

But the problem is not the amount of time that we have, but what we choose to do with that time. It seems that we find the time to do the things that we really want to do.

But if we say, "I believe prayer is important," then we find the time. The effort is worth it.

Pope Francis says that the spirit of prayer gives time back to God, it steps away from the obsession of a life that is always lacking time, it rediscovers the peace of necessary things, and discovers the joy of unexpected gifts. (Daily Message, August 26, 2015)

Prayer floods our souls with the peace only He can bring.
It carries us on our journey as Christians.

“Floods our souls with peace...”

This reminds me of a memoir written by the late American writer and poet, Madeleine L'Engle titled *A Circle of Quiet* which focussed on her life at her summer home in rural Connecticut. She said, “Every so often I need OUT. . . . My special place is a small brook in a green glade, a circle of quiet from which there is no visible sign of human beings. . . . I sit there.... and things slowly come back into perspective. (pg. 4)

May we all practise giving time back to God, and finding our place to connect with Him in our own “circle of quiet.”

Amen.

