

Year B* Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany* 2/5/06

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In the Morning While It was Dark

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

This picture of Jesus rising early in the darkness, finding a deserted place and praying is for me one of the most powerful in all the stories about him. He needs to pray and he will do whatever he has to, to make sure he has the time and the space to pray.

We pray because we know that we need help and that life is too much for us. This is true of all of us. We all need help. Life is sometimes too much for all of us. In his true humanity Jesus knew that he needed help and life was too much for him, so he rose early, while it was still very dark, and he found a deserted place.

I was recently at a workshop regarding cancer and how to cope with it. Part of the presentation was a list of lies we tell ourselves.

- We must always be in control of a situation.
- We must always appear as if we need no help and are self-sufficient.
- Asking for help reveals that we are not good people.

I was struck by that list and how it plays out in my life. Prayer is a complete negation of those lies.

Prayer acknowledges that we are often not in control.

Prayer admits that we are not self-sufficient and assumes someone or something is there to help us. The prayerful person finds a paradoxical strength by admitting he has limitations or weaknesses.

Jesus had had a hard day. A day of healing. A day of fighting with evil. A day of disciples and mothers-in-law, a day all were sick or possessed by demons were brought to him. A big day. What I love about Jesus in Mark's gospel is all this outpouring of energy doesn't leave him untouched. He is exhausted. But his exhaustion is not just physical it is also spiritual.

One of my favorite cards sent to me by a wonderful irreverent friend pictures two frumpy looking men in robes, sitting on a rock. One man, with an exhausted look on his face is talking to the other man who has a little squiggly halo over his head. I always imagine it to be Peter who is obviously talking to Jesus. Peter says, "Jesus, do you ever have days when you just figure "The hell with it!?" Jesus' weary look answers "Yes, I do!"

Jesus has needs like any of us. And his greatest need is to reconnect with the source of his physical and spiritual strength. He needs to pray.

The questions this raises for me is "Do we recognize our need to pray?" Is it a need so deep we allow it to wake us up early in the morning, or set aside time in the middle of the morning, or before we go to bed, to reconnect with the real source of our lives, God? Do we know how deep our need is?

Sometimes our need is overwhelming. Listen to this prayer written by a veteran of war. It's simply called "A Prayer."

This is to the being I know as God
God please help me to be a better human being.
As a young man, I killed a lot of people for no good reason!
What became no good reason!
I would love to blame someone else, anyone else for how I feel about what I did,
the killing.
What I thought I had to do to survive to be a
good American like my dad.
I must have had other choices. I know I had other choices Forgive me
I will try to do good things for my fellow human beings like nursing,
Fighting fire and save lives. It's what I know. Until you call me, or whatever way you
use
to make this pain end.
God; you can take me anytime. Me
(A Prayer by Bill Barbeau)

Like Jesus this man knows he needs to reconnect with "a being". Life has left him scarred, wounded, yet wanting to give himself to others. This man also knows he needs to connect to the source from which he came.

Our prayer is not always so raw. There is an everyday way in which Jesus and the rest of us need God. As one of our brothers likes to say, "There are really only two prayers. 'Help me! Help me!

The wonderful thing about prayer is that as soon as we turn to God, God is there, God has never left, has always been there waiting for us to notice. When we finally do notice and turn back to God we may not receive a magical healing like the boy in the Elisha story, we may not have a lovely spiritual experience with God as I imagine the disciples made sure Jesus didn't get, we may not get complete and instant relief from our sorrow or suffering.

But we will be with God for a few minutes. And we will receive whatever God has to give to us in mercy, strength, humor, humility, energy to go on another day. And that is miracle enough.

I had a busy weekend this past week. Twelve of us went to Washington D.C. to work at an Episcopal Church called the Church of the Epiphany.

Eight adults and four Sr. High young women;

- drove 8 and a half hours,
- prepared dinner, visited with the homeless guests who came for dinner, played spoons and chess and cards with them,
- talked about basketball,
- and served a dinner,
- then went to sleep on the cots from Hades.

The next morning we:

- worked at a food bank,
- cleaned apartments,
- walked down to Chinatown, toured the National Cathedral, shopped at the Urban Outfitter, ate Thai Food, some of us,

- others dined at the Hard Rock Cafe, (Did you know that when you go to the Hard Rock Cafe you cannot ask them to turn down the music?)
- We viewed every monument in sight and visited the FDR Memorial, the Lincoln Monument, the Korean War Memorial, the Ford Theater, the Hagan Daz Ice Cream Store, and almost got arrested.

Then Sunday Morning we got up before 6 AM;

- attended a Narcotics Anonymous Meeting,
- a Bible Study for street folks,
- helped with arts and crafts,
- set up tables and chairs,
- worshipped and shared the Eucharist with 200 lovely homeless folks, then served them as they had breakfast.
- We cleaned up, toured the Bureau of Alcohol, Drugs and Tobacco, tried to get in to see the Paul Cezanne exhibit,
- hopped in our rented vans and drove 8 and a half hours home.

I got tired.

The people who oversaw our visit worked with an organization that was founded by Quakers. So after every event and reflection about that event we would stand in a circle and simply be silent. That's how Quakers. So after every event and reflection about that event we would stand in a circle and simply be silent. That's how Quakers pray. No words, just silence, together, before the mystery of God. The silence lasted about 30 seconds and then ended without an "amen" or "in Jesus name" or anything. That silent prayer around everything we did was a source of strength and connection and community for me.

In those few moments we did what Jesus did. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

Prayer does not require fancy words or words at all. You can use prayers written down and that sometimes is very nice, but you don't have to. You can write down your own prayers or make them up on the spot. You can pray standing up or sitting down, or kneeling. A spiritual friend of mine has suggested I spend more time praying on my knees. Advice I'm going to try out.

But posture is not what is required. Prayer needs an open heart and an admission that you need help from someone else.

Whatever your condition today, whether you are holding it together (or at least appearing to) or falling apart, or something in between, there is a prayer circle here.

Every Sunday Morning is a huge prayer circle for all and any who want to join in. We'll use set prayers, we'll use hymns, we'll use silence, and bread and wine, we may even make up a prayer of our own.

But all you need is your need; your very human need for God, your need for mercy or strength. God will meet you just as you are, right where you need him.

Some poems I thought of while writing this.

To those who knotted nets of twine beside the fish-filled sea,
Christ called allowed, "Put down that line, and come and follow me."

Accustomed to the tug of rope ensnared in rocks and weeds, they felt in Christ a tug of hope for all their tangled needs. -Thomas Troeger

The Kingdom

It's a long way off but inside it

There are quite different things going on:

Festivals at which the poor man Is king and the consumptive is

Healed; mirrors in which the blind look At themselves and love looks at them Back;

and industry is for mending

The bent bones and the minds fractured

By life. It's a long way off, but to get There takes no time and admission

Is free, if you will purge yourself

Of desire, and present yourself with Your need only and the simple

offering Of your faith, green as a leaf.

- Thomas, R.S, from Collected Poems; 1944-1990