

2/4/18 (Emanuel)

Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. 30 Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. 31 So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. 32 That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. 33 The whole town gathered at the door, 34 and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

35 Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37 When they found Him, they said to Him, "Everyone is looking for you!" 38 Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else--to the nearby villages--so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." 39 So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

Isaiah 40:27-31

...Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"? 28 Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. 29 He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. 30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31 but *those who wait for the Lord* shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

So much is packed into this text: healings, exorcisms, a whole town lined up to see Him... Then the next day Jesus, clearly a morning person, finds "**a deserted place**" and prays; everyone hunts for Him; and His response: "**Let's go somewhere else.**" I counted 10 potential sermon possibilities here!

Perhaps I can boil it down. What isn't stated here is how this all begins: Jesus invites Peter/Andrew/James/John to "Follow me." Which is what He *always* does: invite us to follow, observe, listen... then, do. The rest of the story provides clues to what following Jesus looks like. That's good, because remember: we are not "Christ-believers" as much as we are Christ-followers. For example: one of the subtle threads in this story is Jesus' relationship with *time*. By *our* standards, He was a terrible time manager. If there are rules for efficient time use, He broke them all.

Of course, we have our own strange relationship with time. Our reading from Isaiah encouraged us to "**wait for the Lord.**" We will do *anything* to avoid waiting, for *anything*.

When Beth & I are in a hurry, we sometimes use Amazon Prime, because we can get things *tomorrow*, so why wait? I don't like my iPhone any more, because it's 2 years old, and *too slow*. Consider this: If you drive from, say, LA to San Francisco, it takes 6:15—but you can fly in 1:35. That's no longer fast enough; they are testing the Hyperloop, a kind of train that can average 600 mph, promising to shorten the trip from LA to SF to 35 minutes. Which makes perfect sense: If you live in LA and want to take a friend to lunch—SF has better restaurants! I was glad when the speed limit in Wisconsin was raised from 65 to 70, so that now, I can drive 75. "**Wait for the Lord?**" Are you kidding?

We evaluate time by how much we accomplish. Whatever we do, we ask: is this time productive... That doesn't seem to be the calculus Jesus uses, when

He allocates substantial time to something as unproductive as *praying*. During His 3-year ministry, He was constantly surrounded by people needing help. Still, Jesus blocked out time to rest, and to pray. **“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark,”** Jesus **“went off to a solitary place”** out of the public eye. And all He did was *pray*. We know better. We’re much too busy doing important things to waste too much time for prayer. But this seemingly unproductive time was essential to Jesus’ life and work.

The night before, He’d faced an entire town desperate for healing. He was about to face more of the same, so perhaps this early-morning appointment was His “summit meeting” with God, a strategy session to plan and schedule the day ahead. Perhaps. But maybe not.

A thought that came to me last night: Like everything else we do, we tend to evaluate prayer by how it benefits us. Is it possible that we’re overlooking something—or Someone? Could it be that when we *do* pray, we’re forgetting that there is Someone on the other end of the line? Someone who has said clearly: “I long to know you, and for you to know me. I am restless until you are resting in me.”

Perhaps we’re invited to “wait on the Lord” because God is always, *a/ways*, waiting on us—waiting for us to enter into a conversation grounded in a relationship of trust, affection, love, and a sense that we *both* have a stake in a shared life. Perhaps—no, I think certainly—Jesus understood that in prayer, God as well as God’s child are nourished.

Even Jesus needed to keep Himself grounded. Precisely *because* there was so much to do, this came first. When people were clamoring for Him, His most important task was to not be distracted by the noise and commotion around Him. Simply by praying, He was reminded of who, and Whose, He was, so He did not lose His focus on **“...why I have come.”**

I wish I followed Jesus better in this. I’ve seen how prayer teaches me a lot about myself: I’m reminded that I have demons too: pride, fear...how I often keep other peoples’ pain at a comfortable distance. Because in the quietness of prayer, I’m more vulnerable to hearing *their* voices, which really are the voices of God, calling me out of myself.

...And something else struck me the other day: Jesus always took a stand on the side of love and grace, and called out sin, fear, hate, greed. I realized: His preaching, His healing, and even His praying, were forms of *protest*.

Like a lot of us, I used to be bothered by the sight of protesters in the street. That’s for *other* people (those troublemakers). Seems so...inappropriate. But now, I’ve found myself following Jesus *there* too. Beth and I have been out there marching, with our signs, among some really wonderful people. One of mine says: “I’m a Witness for Justice”—for us, it has become a calling: to witness for racial, economic...*any* form of justice.

If you had asked me 5 years ago what new things I’d want to do in retirement, “protest” wouldn’t even make the list. I still find it amazing that a color-inside-the-lines introvert like me has actually become one of those noisy protesters in the streets. I know: I’m the very image of a calm, dignified, minister—thoughtful, and reserved. Now we’re out there marching and chanting.

My favorite: “Tell me what democracy looks like... This is what democracy looks like!” And it’s not just democracy; this is what love for our community looks like. And for us, this is what following Jesus looks like.

I’m especially surprised by how much it’s a part of my *spiritual* life. (The Coalition For Justice: always begins and ends in a prayer circle...The Women’s March: 16 hour bus ride each way, time we spent studying, singing, praying, learning, because we knew that whatever we encountered, we must respond with the peaceful, grace-filled Spirit of Jesus.)

We’re part of a centuries-long heritage of persistent, peaceful, visible, protest and advocacy. There is a lot of protest in our faith: the prophets (“let justice roll down like water...”), the psalms—often, they were really protest songs! (“Rise up, O Lord, O God, lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed.” Ps. 10:12), even the apostles called out the early Christians at times (“Has not God chosen the poor to be rich in faith...but you have dishonored the poor!” James. 2:5). Even the Greek word for “resurrection”—*anastasis*—literally means: “uprising!” We’re in the midst of the 50th anniversary of the “200 Days” of protests and marches that drew international attention, for fair housing in Milwaukee; the public face of these protests? An activist priest, Fr. James Groppi. Even our quiet ministries of compassion—they’re a form of *protest* against the suffering and neglect of our neighbors.

We follow a Savior whose whole life was an act of protest, because this world was not yet what its Creator intended. We’re part of a grace-filled rebellion, because God has invaded the world, God is taking it back...and people: we are God’s little radicals, standing against anything that separates anyone from God and each other.

All of that to say: for Jesus and for us, prayer too is a legitimate, powerful form of protest. When we pray today “Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are protesting the violent and unjust kingdoms of this world. Not everyone can march in the streets. But when you pray, you’re joining that “great cloud of witnesses” in claiming God’s promise for a world healed, reconciled, God’s new realm of peace.

I thank God for people who prayed for me throughout my career; but I’ll go out on a limb: I suspect that Lisa, Karin, Bill, Mark, Ellen and the Park’s Edge Preschool staff won’t mind if we *pray* for them. Fellow retirees: If we choose to use it, one of the gifts many of us have is a degree of freedom to invest time in prayer, for our world, ourselves, our loved ones...and our sisters and brothers who *are* Emanuel Church. We can take seriously what Jesus called us: a “house of *prayer* for all people”.

Whether gathered here, or alone in our personal “summit” with God, prayer can bathe this world in the light of what it *should*, and will, be. In prayer, we protest against cynicism and despair; we refuse to settle for what is. Our prayers declare: God has a grander dream for this world, and so do we.

So when we march, or feed the hungry, or shelter the homeless, or gather here to sing hymns of praise; when we live as sisters and brothers bound in love; when we meet around this table of forgiveness and healing, and yes, when we

pray: we're witnessing to who we are as followers of this Jesus, whose life we've glimpsed and whose steps we trace.

And however we follow in our Savior's footsteps, I can almost hear us chanting: "This is what God's realm of peace looks like!"

