

Pastor Roy's sermon from February 8, 2015

We are in the first chapter of Mark, the beginning of Jesus ministry, and there are people everywhere pressing in to be noticed and get help. Jesus has spent 40 days in the wilderness praying. In this passage Jesus gets away in the morning to pray alone. He seeks God in solitude. The Spirit leads him. What we know is that Jesus prayed and it appears to have anchored him in life?

How does prayer help? Is it mainly asking God for favors, or to help people we know and love? We all pray when we get in a jam. That's natural. It's a response to our needs and concerns. But if prayer is us trying to get God to do something for us, is that really helpful? Does that not make God a glorified candy machine? Doesn't that kind of prayer simply make God more into our image? Shouldn't prayer be something that makes us more into the image of God? What if our prayer is a simple waiting in the presence of God? A hopeful "sitting" with God. --An offering of our hearts and minds to God.

Prayer as waiting for God, as Isaiah describes in today's lessons, is a great challenge and our will in that prayer will be constantly tested and challenged. Choosing to sit in the presence of God, offering our attention to God, this reforms our will. . .after the likeness of God's love and mercy.

Here is a quiet exercise, waiting for God. Waiting is not action packed. Anything and everything becomes a distraction. We can expect our conscious minds to be busily at work filling the space of our silence. Nature abhors a vacuum—how much more, our minds, which instinctively are defending, planning, pondering possibilities and outcomes. Busy at work, practicing what we will say, how we will say it—reminding us how badly we've botched it all in the past? Our minds tell us that we must be ready. Silence will not make us ready. So we abhor silence. Sometimes our minds simply wish to flee from it all, to cover up the anxiety and even boredom. We have television, cell phones, radio. Just, please, no silence. So our minds whisper.

And yet it is only silence which allows the Spirit to move our mental furniture. The way we think. The way we act. The way we fear what is to come. The way we learn to trust.

Silence brings out all the difficult stuff. The demons come when we try to still our minds. Whatever our demons are. If we try it, it will feel like an awkward failure. This is why the practice of the contemplatives is to have a spiritual director, someone who will listen and help guide. So we are not alone. There are professional spiritual directors, yes, but there are also wise people all around us. Seek one out.

The investment in silence is worth a great deal. If we make it a priority, our conscious mind will take notice. It will resist, throwing our way all sorts of reasons to abandon the effort—more important things to do and pursue. It will pretend to jump on board, showing us ways to take short cuts to silence.

So silence will never be easy, but I imagine the longer we try the more we will value its anchoring power. The more we respect it. The more we long for the stillness. Perhaps it is something that becomes more natural with increased age. As we learn how futile our attempt to control everything around us is, we find that we must either learn to trust or despair of this thing called life.

Lest we think silence is too difficult to practice, anybody can do it. It doesn't require reading the right books, it doesn't require special space (any time we are forced to wait for an appointment or in traffic). It doesn't even cost money. It's free.

The only requirement is the discipline to make it happen and to stick with it when we our minds tell us to “abandon ship.” Perhaps this is why some manner of silence is essential to a mature faith. We need the silence to let go of the false hopes, the false expectations and assumptions, the bondages. Apart from silence, we will repeat our mistakes, we will repeat what has been told us, we will fail to see what are the amazing possibilities for good change. On this last Sunday of Epiphany, before Transfiguration Sunday next week which is followed by Ash Wednesday and 40 days of a holy Lenten experience of God—on this day let us begin to prepare to walk even more seriously with God in stillness and hope. We can do this.

There is no success, no failure, only practice. Practice which will bear much fruit, if we try. If we consecrate ourselves to this process.

And when, in your practice of silence, you run up against something difficult which you need to share with someone whom you trust, there are folks here who will make time for you. I will make time for you.

The prayer of Jesus and Isaiah and Paul call us to grow in faith by prayer. It is our calling from God. We are in this together. Thanks be to God. Amen.