

“The Power of Prayer”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
The 5th Sunday after Epiphany – February 8, 2009
Isaiah 40:21-31, Mark 1:29-39

I don't know about all of you, but just listening to today's gospel makes me tired. Can you believe we're still only in chapter one of Mark? Last week we heard about Jesus teaching in the synagogue and casting out a demon. This week he goes straight from the synagogue to Simon Peter's house where he heals Simon's mother-in-law and then at sundown, when the Sabbath is over, the whole city comes to the door so that Jesus can heal their diseases and cast out their demons. I have to take a nap after doing three services on Sunday. I can't imagine how exhausted Jesus must have been after all that healing and exorcising. From the sound of it he could have gone on for days, helping everyone in Capernaum. They really needed him. And he was able to help them.

But Jesus didn't stay to help everyone. “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” He went out of the town by himself to spend time with God. How tempting it could have been to say, oh, who has time for prayer? There are all these people who need me, all these things I need to do. I need to work longer hours and care for more people. There's simply no time for prayer. How could Jesus justify making time for prayer when there were so many people depending on him?

Isn't that what we say to ourselves? That we don't have time for all the important things we need to be doing, so how can we make more time for prayer? Maybe I shouldn't speak for you. Let me speak for me. It seems like there's always something calling me away from prayer time. And I'm a priest! But there are always meetings or people to see or emails to answer or the house to clean or the groceries to buy. Or if I'm not actually too busy, then I distract myself with television or Facebook or talking on the phone. If it's morning I tell myself that I need to get on with my day, with my real work. I promise to make time when I get back home. But then I'm tired and sluggish and I rationalize by saying that I'd better wait till I'm fresh to spend time with God. Why is it so much easier to fill my time with things other than prayer? Spending time with God would renew and strengthen me so much more than all this activity.

Jesus showed us how. He got up and went out alone and prayed. He got rid of the distractions, separated himself from all those who needed him, and found quiet time to be with God. Even when his disciples came and found him, making demands of him, telling him that he was needed, he resisted the distraction. You see, I don't think that Jesus went out to pray just as a means of self-care. I think he was resisting another temptation, and he resisted it by spending time in prayer and listening to what God wanted him to do next.

Think about it. Even though it was probably exhausting to heal so many people and cast out their demons, it also had to feel good. Jesus was really helping people, making a difference in their lives. He could have stayed in Capernaum and helped everyone there. He had the power to cure them all. It had to be a huge temptation to keep on helping them.

But he didn't. Now if we judged Jesus by our own standards, we might say he was being irresponsible. He had important work to do. People needed him. How could he go out by himself to pray? And then how could he ignore his disciples' need for him to get back to the town and continue his work? Jesus was able to resist all the clamoring voices because he spent time in prayer. He turned to God and relied on God to show him where he needed to go next. It wasn't back to Capernaum to heal more people. It was on into Galilee to proclaim his message. Jesus' prayer helped him discern what he needed to do next. It may not have seemed like the obvious thing, especially to his disciples, but he knew it was the right thing because he had made the time to listen for God. He relied on God to show him the next step of the way rather than listening to those around him who had their own agendas for him to follow instead of God's.

Jesus modeled for his disciples and for those of us who follow him now a way of prayer not only for renewing strength but also for discerning direction. I've been wondering this week how we can embody Jesus' model of prayer here at Hickory Neck, not only in our individual lives but also corporately as a parish. One thing I've learned since coming here is that Outreach is very important to this congregation. Both individually and corporately Hickory Neckers reach out into the community to help those in need. Just as Jesus could have stayed in Capernaum, sitting on the front steps of Simon's house, healing every person in the town, so we could try to respond to every need that we see. But like Jesus, in a manner of speaking, the Outreach Committee has gone out to pray, to discern where God is calling us next. We have entered a period of conversation and prayer and planning as we ask God to direct us to our next steps on the way. Jesus' time in prayer helped him to focus on what he had come out to do. It is our hope that our time in prayer will show us what we have come out to do.

I would like to invite all of you into our prayer. In the coming weeks we are going to add into the Prayers of the People thanksgivings for the organizations that we support with our time, talent, and treasure. When I visited one of these organizations last week, one of the directors thanked me for both the financial support and volunteer support Hickory Neck has provided. Then he said, “What we’re most thankful for, though, are your prayers.” His words were a powerful reminder to me of how important our prayers are.

Please pray for the organizations we work with and support, both during the Prayers of the People and in your individual prayer time. Please pray for the Outreach Committee, that we might discern what God is calling us to do next. Please pray for Hickory Neck Church, that we may continue to proclaim the kingdom of God to each other and to the world.