

## Growing in Prayer

Saint Mark

September 27, 2020

If you were one of the 12 disciples as recorded in the gospels, and you followed Jesus and could ask him anything at all, what would you or I ask about?

I have a feeling that some of us would want to know about how things are going to work out in our lives or our world. Others would be asking what God wants me to do with my life. Still others would bring a specific problem in their lives and ask advice.

But it is interesting that in the gospels those disciples who spent all their time with him, and really were getting a good idea of who he was, only asked him one thing ultimately.

The only thing they asked him was a good question - "Lord, would you teach us to pray?"

Not "Lord, teach us how to write a sermon, or run a committee, or fix the air conditioning.

The only thing they asked help with was prayer. I wonder why?

You might know the name Howard Thurman. He was among other things, Dean of the chapel at Howard University, and he also wrote books of beautiful devotionals that I like to read.

As a teacher, he would welcome students into his Biblical Studies class on the first day with an assignment. The only assignment for the semester.

Write a 50 page paper on the prayer life of Jesus using only the Bible itself as a source. A student who took this class got his paper back at the end of the term and it had the same comment on it that every other paper did as well. The comment was:

"I hope you have learned from this experience that one does not pray in order to appear religious, but in order to be true to the grain in one's wood."

That is why the disciples asked this one favor of Jesus.

Sometimes we fall into the habit of treating prayer differently than Howard Thurman would suggest. We put a dividing line in our lives, and on one side there is the sacred, holy things and on the other the secular or non-religious things. During our work week, that is our secular life, then on Sundays we cross over into the religious things, the sacred life. And so it ends up that Sunday is our day to pray.

It is pretty obvious that if Jesus is our model to follow, he did not have that dividing line in his life. His whole ministry was based on prayer. And what the disciples were seeing was that prayer was so central to his life, the fiber of his being, the grain in his wood - they wanted that!

Now, unlike the disciples, the crowd had lots of requests for Jesus. - Master can you heal me, can you heal my son, can you give me sight, can you do this or that for me??

And the way I see it, Jesus took each one calmly and dealt with them with compassion. Heal them, bless them,

forgive them. The disciples looked on with awe. How can he do this? He is tired, he is hungry. How can he love these people so much?

They realized early on his source of strength was prayer. That is what gave him the connection to the Creator as we say in the reformed faith, the calm to be able to handle the crush of the crowds.

One gospel story is an example of this. Mark chapter 9 is the story of a boy who was epileptic, or had a similar malady. Mark's gospel calls it a kind of bad Spirit. A man asked the disciples to heal this boy, and they were unable, so Jesus comes along, and this man tells him the story - look your disciples tried to heal this boy but the could not, so he says to Jesus please heal him if you are able.

Jesus was almost incredulous. If you are able? All things can be done for those who believe.

The father is getting to the end of his rope at this point - He says "I believe, help my unbelief."

So Jesus heals the boy - as Mark says, casts out this Spirit, and the disciples are amazed, and of course they all ask Jesus how he did this when they could not.

Jesus looked at them and simply said, "This kind can come out only through prayer." (Mark 9:29)

(you can look it up, Casey said)

You can get a better feeling for why the disciples wanted to know about this kind of prayer - if you can teach me anything teach me to pray.

So one person said that Jesus was a person who prayed with his eyes wide open. Sure he told his disciples to

pray in a closet and be kind of secretive, but that was so they were not trying to appear pious and religious.

Jesus prayed not just in lonely places but also with his eyes on his surroundings.

Today as we consider growing in prayer, there are 2 ways I would suggest we might be able to grow.

First, would you keep eyes opened to see the God moments that happen to us and with us?

What do I mean by that? The gospels frequently say, "Seeing the crowd, Jesus had compassion on them." "Seeing the crowds"

He was so aware of the hurts of the world, of the people who crossed his path daily, wherever he was at the time, and he prayed for them as they encountered him.

And so often, it was while he was on the way somewhere else, or doing something else, he would be interrupted by a shout or by someone tugging at his clothes. My Mentor called this the "Ministry of Interruption" as Jesus would turn his focus to the person and give them his full attention even as he was supposed to be doing another thing.

I have often wondered about these kinds of moments, and I am always curious when I hear them described. Even recently here at Saint Mark we have heard some stories like that.

So often they come to us unexpectedly. I know I was this past week thinking about how a member of our family is suffering from illness, and worrying about the news of continuing disease and strife in our country and wondering how to pray.

A seemingly insignificant thing crossed my path not long after.

You see, I am a fan of old classic vinyl albums from the 60's and 70's and I had read that Rolling Stone magazine had updated a list of the 500 best albums of all time. The new number 1 they chose was Marvin Gaye, "What's Going On". Some of you might remember that. So luckily I was able to pull out that album to look at it, and there in the lower corner of the inside my eyes were drawn to a paragraph from the artist himself:

"Find God: we've got to find the Lord. Allow him to influence us. I mean what other weapons have we to fight the forces of hate and evil? Just a sincere and personal contact with God will keep you more together. Love the Lord, be thankful, feel peace. Thanks for life and loved ones."

What Marvin said has some truth in it. What other weapons have we to fight hate and evil in our world?

Keeping my eyes opened to God moments helps to focus my prayer life, and yours as well.

Would you be attuned to these, and pray silently for people who cross your path - your delivery person, your grocery store worker, your postman, your healthcare people, your neighbor?

When your eyes are wide open, you can see those Spiritual moments when they unexpectedly happen, and you can see the needs around you and pray for them!

2- Would you pray not only for those few encounters, but also specifically for our community of faith? In the midst of our year of transition, what could be more

important than each and every one of our prayers for our community of faith here at Saint Mark?

A while ago, I had our monthly meeting with the Interim Pastors network of National Capital Presbytery. One of the discussion topics involved reflections on the theology of calling a permanent installed pastor for a church, which we are going to be doing down the road.

As someone who has worked in both church and secular environments, I was taken by one particular principle that National Capital Presbytery applies to this process. Listen to this quote:

In calling a permanent pastor, the relationship between pastor and congregation is unique, and the *policies and practices of the secular world that govern hiring staff do not largely apply to calling a pastor!* To those of us in the professional world, this is going to take some re-imagining and re-thinking. So if it's not about Best Practices or the HR manual, to what or to whom do we turn?

The theological spiritual principle is this: Pastors are called through a process of spiritual discernment a deep listening for God's intention for the congregation and the pastor, as free as possible from the limitations of human imagination and bias. In a word: PRAYER!

As we move forward, as the Pastor Nominating committee is formed and begins working, as the rest of us wait for their work to be completed, it is expected from the PNC and from each of us that we will find ways to be in deep listening, in deep discernment for where the Holy Spirit is leading us.

Ask, seek and knock - how much more will God give the spirit to those who ask, as Luke says.

Prayer is a powerful force.

I am sure you are familiar with the organization Habitat for Humanity. In 1991 Millard Fuller was deeply troubled by the substandard housing he saw around him in Sumpter County GA

He said we need to end substandard housing - it is morally and spiritually wrong for people to live like this.

So he went to leaders in religion and government. They brought up all the reason why this could not be done. How much would it cost, who would do it?

They couldn't agree on anything, but Fuller said, OK, would you just pray about it?

In 1992, he goes back to the leadership, has all these statistics and they still were not committed, "Would you at least pray about it?"

In September 2000 a house was dedicated in Sumpter County, called Victory house. It was the house which ended substandard housing in the county.

Of course, Jimmy Carter was there, and said "In 1976 we put our county on the map for electing a President, but now we are going to be known as a place that ended substandard housing."

One man, opened his eyes, saw the need, and prayed about it, slowly changed the world.'

What is the lesson in all of this?

Let us not undervalue prayer, be open to God moments, and not only pray in quiet times, but also with the needs of the world around us. Ask even if it seems unlikely or even impossible, for by God's grace and Jesus own words: All things are possible for this who believe.

Ask and it shall be given to you

Seek and you will find

Knock and the door will be opened.

Thanks be to God. Amen.