

TEXT: Mark 1:29-39
THEME: In prayer we discover our own deepest reality
SUBJECT: Prayer
TITLE: Linger Long and Lovingly With the Real

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
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Messiah Moravian
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Nothing has changed human nature so much as the loss of silence, argues Max Picard, author of *The World of Silence*. The invention of printing, technology, compulsory education—nothing has so altered human nature as this lack of relationship with silence, a silence as natural as the sky above or the air we breathe. In losing silence we have not merely lost one human quality but the whole structure of our nature has changed.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus seeks silence in order to pray on three occasions. The first time follows a long day of teaching and healing. Jesus rises early in the morning, some time between 3:00 am and 6:00 am, and goes to a deserted place to pray. The disciples are furious.

Mark tells us they "hunted" him down to drag him back to the waiting crowds. Jesus has become famous and they want to trade on his popularity. Jesus responds, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."

The second time Mark records Jesus praying is following the feeding of the five thousand (6:46). The third time is in Gethsemane where he is arrested (14:32-39). These three times of prayer occur in the dark and in solitude. In the whirlwind of activity that is his life and work, in the face of fame and opposition, Jesus seeks solitude and silence in order to stay grounded in reality.

Patti Smith's mother taught her the prayer many of us learned as children: *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.* Patti was relieved when her mother allowed her to make up her own prayer, to say instead what was in her heart. She would lie in bed by the coal stove vigorously mouthing long letters to God.

Patti believes she vexed God with her endless vows, visions, and schemes. But as time passed she came to experience a different kind of prayer, a silent one, requiring more listening than speaking.

Mary Karr says she started kneeling to pray morning and night—spitefully at first, in a bitter pout. The truth is, she still fancied the idea that slugging down Jack Daniels would stay her turmoil, but doing so had resulted in her car hurtling into stuff. She had made many vows to her baby, and—whatever whiskey's virtues—it had gotten hard to maintain her initial argument that it made her a calmer mom to a colicky infant.

In the morning she prayed, *Keep me sober.* At night she prayed, *Thanks.* And she didn't get drunk. Someone gave her the prayer of St Francis and she started reciting it every night with her

five-year-old son. Over time she discovered that God spoke to her most powerfully through quiet. She found a way out of herself, to see the reality that we, and all things, are connected, are interrelated.

In prayer we discover our deepest reality from which we have strayed like runaway children becoming strangers to ourselves. The whole of the spiritual life finds its fulfillment in bringing our entire life into a transforming, loving communion with the ineffable God. This communion is the fulfillment of our deepest hunger. In fact, this communion reveals that we ourselves are ineffable, being made in the image and likeness of God and called to a union of identity with God forever.

James Finely observes, “We pray not to recharge our batteries for the business of getting back to the concerns of daily life, but rather to be transformed so that the myths and fictions of our life might fall like broken shackles from our wrists. We withdraw within not to retreat from life but to retreat from the constant evasion, the constant fearsome retreat from all that is real in the eyes of God.”

Encounter with God in prayer, especially in a deserted place in the dark, awakens my conscience in such a way that it no longer aims at self-justification. Prayer is a death to every identity that does not come from God. Prayer frees us and restores us to ourselves. The desert where prayer flourishes is the desert of our own hearts barren of all the slogans that we have been led to believe to be our very identity and salvation.

Pope Benedict XVI, drawing on St Augustine, describes the prayer of silent listening so essential to our wellbeing. We are created for greatness—for God. We are created to be filled by God. But our hearts are too small for the greatness that is our destiny. Our hearts must be enlarged.

Suppose God wishes to fill you with honey [a symbol of God’s tenderness and goodness]; but if you are full of vinegar, where will God pour the honey? The vessel, that is your heart, must first be enlarged and then cleansed, freed from the vinegar and its taste. This requires hard work and is painful, but in this way alone do we become suited to that for which we are destined.

To pray is not to step outside history or withdraw to our own private corner of happiness. When we pray properly we undergo a process of inner purification which opens us up to God and thus to one another as well. We must learn that we cannot pray against others. It is only by recognizing our common humanity that we can pray, “*Our* Father, who art in heaven.”

When lies are the coin of the realm, when cynicism and shamelessness are fashionable, when algorithms push conspiracy theories for profit spawning violence and death, when Christian Nationalism—an idolatrous movement—perverts the gospel and sabotages democracy, we can do worse than to rise while it is still dark and walk to a deserted place to pray.

In solitude and silence, through attentive awareness, we linger long and lovingly with the real. Such prayer clarifies our mission: to follow in the way of Jesus, to bear witness to the truth, and to work for the flourishing of life—all life.

PRAYER: Meister Eckhart (c. 1260 - 1327)

“The Prayer of the Heart Detached”

What is the prayer of a heart grown calm
in the peace of God?

From such a purity one no longer prays
as we are wont to pray.

From such a purity one is free from asking
any further gift of God, and is free
also from asking that anything
be taken away.

A heart in calm detachment asks
for nothing, nor has anything
it would wish to shed.

Its prayer is finally only for uniformity
with God. This is its entire prayer.