

March 15, 2020

The Power of Withdrawing

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Scripture Readings: Matthew 14:22-23 & Luke 5:16

Matthew 14:22-23 (NRSV)

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,

Luke 5:16 (NRSV)

“...he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.”

Although I had finished this message on Wednesday of this week, and I knew in time we would do our due diligence in helping with our state’s and nation’s efforts to help stop the spreading of the coronavirus, I did not anticipate how quickly things would start moving once the first cases of the virus were confirmed in Michigan.

At the same time I am very grateful for the quick actions that were no doubt hard to make by our state’s and denomination’s leaders. Our church had been preparing with conversations prior to the announcement on Thursday of all Michigan schools closing for three weeks as well as the request by Bishop David Bard on Friday afternoon asking all United Methodist Churches to postpone of worship services and in-person meetings at church for the rest of the month of March.

It was on Friday morning I began what typically is a relaxing day for me with reading the Lenten devotional “The Sanctuary for Lent 2020” by Sam McGlothlin. Though written well before even the knowledge of the coronavirus and possibility of where we are in the United States as we are today, Friday the 13th’s devotional was about God providing manna and quail for all those hungry and in need of food as recorded in the book of Exodus, chapter 16. Sam wrote of how God told everyone to take only what they needed and nothing more. And of course, human nature is often to react in panic when there is a shortage or potential of shortage. Please know that this is understandable when you either do not know if there will

be enough food to survive or if you do not know when you will have your next meal. McGlothlin wrote at one point “Few of us truly know how to be comfortable with enough, and so we panic and hoard.” And he ended his devotional with “Where there is abundance, let us practice giving so that others have exactly what they need.”

I admit it is not easy to simply get what you think you’ll need for the many weeks things have been closed or shut down, especially when we don’t know exactly how long we will need to continue to keep certain places and events closed. When shopping at the pet store for dog food, I was very surprised to find that the dog food I needed was half off the original price when I was checking out. The cashier asked if I’d like to buy more. I surely did. Then he asked me if I wanted all the bags they had. I will tell you that I was tempted to buy and save and buy the remaining bags that were left. But as I was in line with a few other customer, and having read McGlothlin’s devotional that impressed it more on my heart and mind what I should do, I said I’d like to buy them all but will leave the rest for those who need it now.

Please pardon me if I seem to be boasting here, but I actually shared this because it was a real moment for me that I struggled with at that very moment and could have easily bought all of that one dog food. Why not at such a deal, right? Who would fault me? And I say probably no one would. In fact, some would congratulate me for taking advantage of a deal that was obviously presented to me to take.

However, what it taught me was how important it is to daily take time to get away, even for a few minutes, to spend with God alone and to reflect, pray, and draw nearer to the One who loves us, wants what is best for us, and guides us for the love of God and love of one another.

We all need those moments to help us not only refocus but to also remember who we are, who we follow, and how to act when it’s so easy to do that which benefits us so much and does not seem to harm anyone else. When we take time to get away from things, to healthily withdraw, then we see more clearly with spiritual eyes and the way Jesus would have us see...in how we see God, the ways and teaching of Christ, as well as how we see others, and even see ourselves.

More and more it seems like we are busier and busier, to busy it seems to even take those moments we know we need to take with family, friends, and of course with God.

I'm no stranger to being busy. There was a time in my life that I was so busy that I did not take a vacation for 6 years. Thank God it was before I got married since that would not have worked at all for me and my wife and children.

I would say that when I look back at that time, I not only got a lot done in that time but actually do not have many regrets since I was doing what I felt I needed to do. I was, however, worn thin and did not grow in ways that I later found I had actually neglected. Even while I was studying and in fact very active in the church I attended and served as a volunteer, I did not follow in the steps of Christ when it came to this one thing we all need as followers of Jesus. It will not only make one of the biggest differences in your life, but it makes for what you absolutely need the most, and that is a close walk with God. The closer you walk with God the better you will be blessed to live life and love those in your life, including family, friends, strangers, and even your enemies.

As I said, Jesus withdrew to be alone and to pray. I know that how close we draw to God makes all the difference in the world for us and more importantly for those who have not experienced God. Christ wants all of us to experience a relationship that is exemplified by Christ and so many in the Bible and throughout history, including today.

And prayer is the power, not in itself, but in the One we pray to and talk with. The power of withdrawing is in whom we withdraw to be with. Just as we need time alone to clear and rest our minds, to relax and renew our bodies, and even help us as we need to find emotional rest, it is the same with us spiritually, which affects all of the other aspects of who we are. Spiritually speaking, when we take time to withdraw and pray to God, it touches every other part of our lives, our relationships, our entire being.

Jesus withdrew into the mountains to be alone and talk with God.

When we talk about prayer, sometimes it can seem more complex than it is. Sure most of us know how to say a prayer for a meal, for certain occasions and possibly in specific settings. When I was a youth, I realized I knew how to pray to a certain extent, but wanted learn more about how to pray. I spoke with my Sunday school teachers, and they gave me a wonderful book, that I wish I had not lost sometime go in several moves my family made as I grew up.

As I continued to learn how to pray, and again it seems so simple yet not at times, it was at a Christian event called Kingdom Works in 1999 that I met and heard

Brennan Manning preaching an incredibly powerful message that I remember almost all of to this day. It was that powerful. In fact, and thank God for technology, you can find his entire message on YouTube or elsewhere online. Simply search for Brennan Manning Sermon: Kingdom Works 1999.

It was not only mind-blowing to me, but also spirit-exploding of a message he preached that day. His powerful stories left me changed to this day, including the story he shared about how to pray. Without totally spoiling this one of many stories he shared, his story about prayer gifted me with an even greater faith and ability to feel Christ's presence as I prayed and talked with my Lord, Shepherd, and friend Jesus. I not only imagine Christ is right beside me, I truly believe and know it.

As I have continued to grow in my understanding and active prayer life, I have come to realize more of the reasons Jesus took time to withdraw from everyone and everything, even if it was for a short period of time before returning to another need or even crisis.

I share all this because that is exactly what Jesus did while he walked the earth. Though we don't know much about his childhood, we do know a lot about his last years of life, including what we read in our Scripture readings for today's message; from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 14, verses 22-23 and the Gospel of Luke, chapter 5, verse 16.

As we all need to take breaks, to get away, to withdraw, whether it's to take a walk, a nap, to do something we enjoy or spend with someone that helps renew us, we also are taught by Jesus' example to withdraw not only to get away from things but to draw closer to God.

This is where we gain our spiritual strength, renewal, and source of all we need for living and loving for God. Jesus, though fully God and fully man, could have used his divine power to do everything all by himself. But he chose to show us the way of life in working with others and staying connected to his Heavenly Father, whom we call God the Father as we understand the triune God. This triune God is shown in Christ's baptism when Jesus, God the Son, had the Holy Spirit descend upon him, God the Spirit, and a voice from heaven speaking, which was God the Father.

I mention Jesus' baptism not only to give an example of the Trinity, but also because in the 14th chapter of Matthew we read that just before Jesus fed the

5,000, when he withdrew to be alone and pray, he had heard his relative John the Baptist, who baptized Jesus, was beheaded.

No doubt most all of us, if not every single one of us, has experienced the loss of a loved one or have comforted someone who has lost a loved one. And it seems like even so, there are always things that have to be done, people to be taken care of, and of course the unexpected things that come up.

If you read the entire 14th chapter of Matthew, you'll find that though Jesus withdrew, it wasn't long until he had to deal with the crisis of his disciples on a boat and in the middle of a storm in which Jesus walked out on the water and where Peter courageously learned for a brief moment how to walk on water also. And when they arrived safely to land, people recognized Jesus and went to meet him, hear him teach, and of course bring all who were sick to be healed.

Jesus hardly ever got a break. And some would quickly reply, well who does? Or it was Jesus, he came to save the world, and he is God, so why would he need a break?

Though fully God, Jesus also chose to be fully human when he came to earth, being born as a child, growing up, experiencing all we experience as humans, including death, a most painful, cruel and torturous one.

We must take from this that if the Son of God, with all the divine powers at his hands, even though he did not use them even close to their full capacities, took the time to withdraw and to pray to God, then we for sure, as mere humans, should follow in his example and find the source of strength and power for life and for love as Christ did. Yes, we have the Holy Spirit of God within us, the very power of God to raise Jesus from the dead lives in us. But just as we are commanded to have a day of rest to devote it to God, we also need regular times to withdraw and pray to the one who knows us, created us, saved us, and calls us to live a life that shares that same saving grace and love of Christ with others that we have been blessed with.

We need to take time to get away, even if it's in another room in our house, outside in the yard, inside of our car, or to walk around the neighborhood or nearby park. Jesus not only did it but needed it. And we most definitely need it too.

How often do we carry burdens without taking them to God? What is more powerful than a good and trusted friend to confide in, vent to, and feel free to be

open to for support and without judgment? We need people in our lives and we need to lean on each other. That's why Jesus made sure the disciples went out in pairs when sent out. At the same time, we cannot forget or neglect the main way that allows us to not only handle difficulties in our lives but truly live life, even through the challenges, trials, disappointments, failures, crushed dreams, great losses, and times of feeling hopeless and lost.

Could you imagine the conversations Jesus, the Son of God, had with his Heavenly Father? Well, if you remember, there are times when we are allowed to hear what Jesus said, even at the toughest times, such as before he gave himself up to be crucified. He asked his closest friends and disciples to stay near and pray for him as he withdrew to pray. And Jesus basically prayed for some other way for our sins to be paid, and that if there was no other way that God the Father's will be done. It is so revealing, whether reading it for the first time or the umpteenth time. We are told this in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 26, verses 36-44:

³⁶Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." ³⁷He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. ³⁸Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." ³⁹And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." ⁴⁰Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? ⁴¹Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." ⁴²Again he went away for the second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." ⁴³Again, he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words.

And notice several important things. One is that Jesus asks his disciples to pray for him. Jesus stays connected to his disciples even though he is about to withdraw from them to pray. He takes Peter and two other disciples to stay somewhat close to him, but tells them how he is hurting emotionally and needs their support in prayer. Jesus does share with those he trusts and chooses what he feels is needed as he is asking for support. And in this time of prayer, Jesus prays three times the same thing, yet seeks above all the will of his Heavenly Father. Finally, though his friends fail him in staying awake, and no friend is perfect even if they are perfectly

there for us, we find that we still need them, forgive them, and walk onward as we journey through this life and the mission Jesus gave for us.

We revisit Jesus praying in the garden because we not only withdraw when things are good, but also when things feel difficult and challenging and are the worst. And to pray over and over and over as much as needed, even asking for what we may believe we may not get, but being real, open, and trusting through prayer.

The power of withdrawing is in taking that time to go to God, to let it out, to share your joys and your sorrows, your wishes as well as your statements and acts of seeking first God's will, even when you don't know where to turn or what to do next.

I have learned that when there doesn't seem to be a clear path to take, that after getting as much wise counsel as possible, praying to God to help you make the right choices and to help guide you even if you have or seem to have made the wrong or not-as-good of a choice is what pleases God the most. And God will surely walk with you every step of the way, even if you're asking and pleading for God to change directions or plans that seem to be unfolding.

There are some 2 dozen times in the Bible where we are told Jesus withdrew. But I'm sure there were many other times not recorded in the Bible.

Let us not be afraid to take breaks even when it seems like doing so is impossible. You can stand right where you are, in the middle of the storm even, and take time to withdraw in your mind and spirit to pray to God.

And if it seems like more of a waste of time since it doesn't seem to help you get things done, fix a problem that seems ongoing and relentless, or a relationship where the other person will never change in some way or areas of life, then go back and revisit history, which includes the Bible but also your own life, the life of those around you, and those throughout history where God has done what seemed impossible. I am not making any promises here, but go to the One who holds your life and the lives of everyone in His hands, and you'll find that Jesus will more often surprise you and help you grow in faith than not.

I could actually say quite a bit more about the power of withdrawing, as Christ did, to pray to God. But let me end with saying how Jesus said in Matthew, chapter 11, verse 28, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

We should pray at all times and in all circumstances. I pray so many times thanking God for my wife, children, parents, siblings, extended family, friends, new friends, my church family, and so many blessings upon blessings. I pray for others daily. I pray for our country and our world. And for sure I take time to withdraw for myself and to pray to God.

I pray for each of you, that you will do what it takes to take those breaks and times to withdraw until it becomes a regular spiritual habit to get away and be alone with God. That is one of the key elements of our faith and walk with Christ as we faithfully follow the ways, will and Great Commission of Jesus Christ (found in Matthew 28:19-20).

Sure, we need and should take times to rest, do what renews us, and to be with those we love, fully enjoying and making the most of it all. Yet above all, we need to take the time to be with the one who loved us so much that he died to save us and give us life abundant here on earth and promised life eternal one day in heaven. Then you will find, like Jesus knew, the wonderful and deep power of withdrawing and praying to God. Amen.