

Jesus at Prayer: Success
Luke 5:15-16
March 8, 2009

We, who claim to be followers of Jesus, want to pattern our lives after his, and love God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. We, who believe that Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life,” want to discover what is the Jesus way, the Jesus truth, and the Jesus life. We know that he taught, and healed, and preached; that he had a strong sense of purpose; that he knew himself to be beloved of God, that God named him as God’s own son; that he faced rejection and death with more courage and resolve than any of us probably could, and he forgave those who committed what would be to us unforgivable acts against him. But what gave him the power to do that? Was it just that he was divine in his nature, so what he did was unique to him. That would let us off the hook, wouldn’t it! “Well, I can’t do that – I’m not Jesus, you know!”

But that would be a cop out. Jesus calls us to do as he did, not just admire what he did. And according to Luke’s gospel, at least, he did what he did through the power of the Holy Spirit that came to him in prayer. Jesus prays more in Luke’s gospel than in the three other gospels put together. Before every significant and some seemingly not so significant events, Luke notes that Jesus went aside to pray. And when he comes out of those times of prayer, he acts decisively.

In today’s reading, Luke says Jesus was on a roll. He was healing and teaching and preaching and his popularity was rising. People would come from all around to hear him, see him, touch him. And in the midst of that frenzy, Luke says, “he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.” That’s all. He doesn’t tell us what he was praying about. We don’t hear a word about the content of those prayers. But we know a couple of things: We know that this was a repetitive action on his part. He didn’t withdraw just once to pray. The Greek actually can be translated, “he withdrew and withdrew.” And we also know where he went when he withdrew – to the desert. Our translation says “deserted places” but again the original language indicates simply “the desert.” So it’s not that Jesus was looking for a quiet little spot to pray, maybe the back porch of Peter’s mother-in-law’s house, or down by the sea of Galilee, or out in somebody’s olive grove. He went repeatedly into the desert.

Now, we know what happened the first time Jesus went into the desert. It was right after his baptism, and he was, Luke says, “led by the Spirit” into the desert. Biblical writers often use geography metaphorically to tell us things about our relationship with God and about our faith journey. Powerful meetings with God happen on mountain tops – Moses received the Ten Commandments there; Elijah heard the still, small voice of God there, Jesus spoke his sermon on the Mount from a high place; and he was transfigured on yet another mountain top. Mountains are a “thin place” where the human and the divine can touch.

Similarly, the desert is the biblical place of temptation and trial. Jacob wrestles with the angel of God in the desert, on the far side of the Jabok River. Moses leads the children of Israel into the desert where they are tested and tried as they wander for forty years; Jesus is tempted in the desert after his baptism. In the desert all of the props of civilization are taken away. There are no clear paths; no well worn roads, no companions on the way. There are no city walls; there is no protection; and most of all, there is no noise. And it is in the still and quiet of the desert that temptation first came to Jesus.

“If you are the son of God, turn these stones into bread,” Satan suggested to Jesus. “If you are the son of God, become a great leader and do the greatest good for the greatest number.

If you are the son of God, become a great religious leader and set the sinful world aright.” All of those activities are worthy – nothing wrong with feeding people; nothing wrong with trying through political influence to improve the world; nothing wrong with calling on religious faith and religious institutions to offer help, hope, and healing in the name of God. It’s not the activity that is the temptation; it’s the reason for the activity. “If you are the son of God,” Satan says. Jesus is tempted to doubt his identity and God’s faithfulness; he is tempted to do good things for the wrong reasons.

But, Jesus is able to withstand those temptations, telling Satan “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” And Luke concludes, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” (Luke 4:13). Now traditionally, it is thought that the next opportune time came late in Jesus’ life in the garden of Gethsemane, when he prayed to God to let the cup pass from him. But I’m not so sure about that. Luke writes, here in chapter 5, early in his gospel, “But now more than ever, the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.”

Perhaps we tend to think of prayer as a help and a solace in times of sorrow, in times of defeat, in times of rejection. And it is. But prayer is also a much needed, but less called on, resource for strength in times of success. How many of us pray when things are going our way? And other than prayers of gratitude and thanksgiving, what else do we pray? Remember the two arrow prayers – “Help me” and “Thank you” – one for crisis and one for success. But if all we pray is “thank you” when things are good in our world, then Satan has found an opportune time.

Jesus had encountered great success. Everywhere he turned people came to see and hear him and ask something of him. And he was generous with his time and his gifts. Oh, it could be, I suppose, that he withdrew again and again to the desert simply to recharge his batteries, renew his energy, connect with his source of power; “sharpen the saw” as Steven Covey likes to say in his *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Or it could be that he was still unsure of his identity, still searching for confirmation of who he was and what he was supposed to be doing. But the events of his baptism had made that pretty clear.

With that word “desert” I wonder if Luke isn’t telling us that Jesus was continuing to be tempted during this time of rapid increase in his popularity. Studies show, sadly, that more pastors leave the ministry at the height of their success and popularity than when they are struggling. With an increase in power comes an increase in opportunity to go astray; to veer off from the paths of righteousness. We read about it in the newspaper; we hear about it on the news, all the time. I think during Bishop Davis’s tenure here in North Georgia 38 clergy surrendered their credentials because of some kind of failure, either in their personal lives or in their leadership of their churches. Money misallocated – maybe all with good intentions; rationalization of inappropriate personal behaviors. A sense of being exceptional – the rules don’t apply to me.

It is scary how healthy pride in accomplishments can drift silently, malevolently towards arrogance, and self-respect is gradually replaced by self-infatuation. As one person has put it, “Some of our greatest successes are a prelude to some of our worst failures.”¹ Eugene Peterson writes about fallen clergy, “Those who deceive others are first themselves deceived, for not many, I think begin with evil intent. The devil, is after all, a spiritual being. His usual mode of temptation is not to an obvious evil but to an apparent good. The commonest forms of devil-inspired worship do not take place furtively at black masses with decapitated cats but flourish under the bright lights of acclaim and glory, in a swirl of organ music.”² Peterson warns that “a

curious thing happens when we get a taste of God. It happened first in Eden and it keeps happening . . . the taste for God is debased into a greed to be God.”³

We could try to exempt Jesus from this temptation, arguing that after all, he was the incarnation of God. Wouldn't it be OK for him then to claim to be God? That argument is flawed because first it ignores our own imperfect human nature and misunderstands Jesus' perfected human nature. We claim power and knowledge as God-like qualities because selfishly they give us control over others and our environment; they protect us from our enemies; they keep us safe. Jesus, however, was not seeking for power and control over anybody or anything. He sought the other characteristics of God that we're not so quick to identify with—the ones that have to do with loss of power and lack of control – love, grace, mercy, suffering, sacrifice, forgiveness. Jesus, in fact, in Luke's gospel never points towards himself as God, he always points away from himself towards God. For example, he corrects someone who calls him “good teacher,” saying, “Why do you call me good, only God is good.”

I don't think suffering, sacrifice, forgiveness, and humility came easily to Jesus any more than they do to us. He didn't claim them as his virtues by divine right. He struggled with them. He had to withdraw to the desert to pray and to pray and to pray. In that, he was one step, at least, ahead of us. He recognized what was happening. He knew when the tendrils of pride and privilege were beginning to coil around his heart, and when those crowds were cheering, and everyone was pressing in around him, he knew it was time to go aside to root them out. Will Willimon says that pride is something you feel before it is anything you do.⁴

Jesus' self-awareness and his God-awareness were both more sensitive than our own. But if we wish to be his followers, if we hope someday to say with Paul “it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me;” if we desire to become “Little Christs,” as Luther called us, or join with John Wesley in “moving on to perfection,” we can't just dismiss that kind of awareness as above and beyond us. No, we have to pay attention too, we have to listen to the voices speaking to us all the time, but especially at those times when everything is going our way, when the world is our oyster, when life doesn't get any better than this— we have to listen to and identify the voices of those angels of our better natures and the devils of our lesser ones, and go aside, again and again and again to pray. Just like for Jesus, prayer must be a constant and consistent practice. May it be so for you and for me as well.

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¹ Richard Haler quoted in Will Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), p. 36.

² Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*, (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), p. 15.

³ Peterson, p. 12.

⁴ Willimon, p. 40.