

Jesus at Prayer: Decision  
Luke 6:12-16  
March 15, 2009

During Lent we are looking at the prayer life of Jesus as it is seen in Luke's gospel. Of all the gospel writers, Luke shows Jesus at prayer more than the other three put together. At every juncture in his ministry, Jesus prays – at his baptism, during times when things are going well and he's popular and sought after, when he feeds 5,000 people with only two loaves and five fish, and of course at the end of his life, as he breaks bread one last time with his disciples, as he prays in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, and finally on the cross.

As Christians we are called to follow Jesus, to become imitators of Christ, but how can we follow him if we don't know what he did. And so in these weeks I hope we will come to a larger understanding of the part prayer played in his life, and by extension then, should play in ours as we journey on our way of faith. Or topics during these weeks are not about prayer in general – what is prayer, why are some prayers answered and some not, what are different kinds of praying or postures for prayer. Nor is our topic what Jesus taught about prayer; if we want to know that, we can look at Chapter 11 of Luke where the disciples finally say, "Teach us to pray." But instead, we are walking in Jesus' steps, looking at him at prayer, seeing where, and when, and why, and what he prayed. In doing so maybe we'll find new dimensions to our own prayer lives along the way.

In today's reading, Luke says Jesus prayed all night before choosing his closest companions. The other gospels tell of Jesus' choice of the twelve, but only Luke says that choice was preceded by a night of prayer. Can you imagine praying all night? For many of us, praying for five minutes is a gracious plenty. I can remember years ago as the Worship Committee chair at Haygood UMC, sitting with a stop watch and timing each segment of the service to see how everything "flowed." The anthem took three minutes, the announcements maybe two minutes, but when the preacher's prayer went over five minutes, I began to get antsy. It seemed like he'd prayed for every tree and blade of grass and flower in the world, and there was no end in sight. I wasn't very patient and was more than ready to move on to the next "segment" of worship when he finally said "amen"!

We used to have prayer vigils at our church too – people coming to the church in 30 minute units, to pray for some issue or need or concern. They would even come at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. But for many of us, long before that 30 minutes had passed, we were out of things to say and wondering what to do with the rest of the time.

But Jesus spent the whole night, not just a tedious 30 minutes in prayer as he prepared to make one of the biggest decisions of his ministry. Many people had been following him; he was increasingly popular. Wherever he went, people were there asking to be healed, listening to his preaching, excited by his presence. Some of these people were fans – groupies – out to hear whatever new evangelist was in town, whoever was the newest craze in ministry.

We still have that today. There are plenty of preachers around who draw large crowds, that people rave about and get all excited over. We know the names of the ones on TV perhaps – Benny Hinn, Joel Osteen, Pat Robertson, Rick Warren. And a few years back there were Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jimmy Swaggert, Jerry Falwell, Ted Haggard. They come and they go, but all have, for a season, a following of fans. Within the United Methodist church, we have our own super stars too – When I first was ordained, the names were Ken Callahan, Lyle Schaller, Bill Easom, Walt Kallestadt. The latest phenom in Methodism is Adam Hamilton,

pastor of Resurrection UMC in Oklahoma. Our conference is even sending, all expenses paid, five of our brightest and best young pastors to sit at his feet to learn from him.

Disciples are actually a very small percentage of any fan base. Disciples are the ones who take the teachers' words to heart and attempt then to live out what they have been taught. The word "disciple" means "student" or "learner." Jesus had disciples among his many fans and followers. I used to think that the word "disciple" was a special word applied only to the twelve who were closest to Jesus – the "Disciples" with a capital "D". But actually there were many disciples, people who were trying to do as Jesus taught, and were willing to begin changing their lives in response to his message. Luke says in today's readings, that after praying all night, "when the day came, he called his disciples, and chose twelve of them, whom he named as apostles."

Think about that – who knows how many people were standing there as Jesus made his selection, and Jesus chose among them. He had already called some disciples by name – Simon Peter, James and John, Levi-who was also known as Matthew. But now the time had come to choose from his students those who would become teachers themselves – apostles – those sent out by Jesus to teach and preach in his place and in his name. In using that word "apostle," Luke puts the choosing of the twelve into an entirely different light. These aren't just buddies to hang out with Jesus and be his helpers. These are going to be the ones to whom he will entrust his ministry when the time comes for him to leave them. Success or failure rides on this choice – will Jesus of Nazareth be a blip in the history of the first century, just another one of those Jewish messiah figures who happened along during the heyday of the Roman Empire, or will he become the one to change the world, remembered and revered long after the power and influence of Rome lay in the dust?

No wonder Jesus prayed all night; there was a lot riding on his decision. His choice was not just a casual act or personal whim. Luke doesn't tell us what the actual content of Jesus' prayer was. But we can assume that in his prayer, Jesus was not just praying for himself. Not just – who do I like, who do I get along with, who's the best cook, who has money connections – not much of "I," "me," or "mine" in his prayer. No, perhaps we can safely assume that Jesus was praying for something much larger than himself.

Jesus had the ability to see the larger picture, to see himself and understand what was going on in him as well as around him. He saw himself clearly, and he saw the temptations of popularity that could easily distract him from the way of the cross. Here too, he sees clearly. He sees the big picture – who his people have been before him, the covenants that God has made with them to be their God and to make them God's people. He sees the present, his calling to bring people back to that covenant relationship, the importance of teaching and preaching to enlighten his generation. And finally, he is able to see beyond himself to the future. How can he ensure that this revelation of God be continued and grow after he is gone.

He chooses twelve to symbolize the continuity of God's people – twelve tribes of Israel – twelve apostles. When Judas betrays Jesus, another is chosen to take his place, maintaining the traditional twelve. For Jesus, it is important that the work begun so long ago in the past with God's covenant with Abraham be continued on in to the future in these twelve. So on their shoulders rests both the past and the future, both memory and hope.

Jesus hadn't already decided who he'd choose; it took all night in prayer to come to a decision. And just because Jesus spent all this time close to God, everything then didn't become magically easy or simple. If there's one thing we can learn from Jesus, it is that closeness to God, rarely, if ever, makes things simple. It usually makes things more complicated – deeper,

more powerful, more significant – but not more simple. The purpose of the prayer wasn't to make it easy for Jesus, or for God to single out for Jesus who to pick.

Also spending all night in prayer with God did not guarantee that he'd choose the best qualified people—at least by our way of thinking. In fact, we could be tempted to ask Jesus, “All night, and you couldn't come up with a better group than these? Peter who will deny you; James and John who are self-absorbed mama's boys, Judas, who will betray you?” But these are the ones, with their foibles and failures, warts and all, in whom Jesus, with God's help, put his trust and faith for the future.

The good news about these flawed choices, is that they are us! When Jesus put his faith and trust into that less than perfect bunch, when he prayed all night and came up with their names, he came up with ours as well – people who deny him every day, people who are self-centered and pampered, people who betray him again and again. But people also who ask for forgiveness, give thanks for mercy, and get up to start all over again. Fred Craddock says that “we” – the church – began in the mind and heart of Jesus during this all night vigil of prayer.<sup>1</sup>

And so if we are to be that church Jesus prayed for two thousand years ago, if we are to be the bearers of the covenant with Abraham and the spiritual descendants of those first apostles, of Peter, and James and John, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas and the rest, how are we to pray? Well, first of all it looks like we should be praying long and hard before any kind of decision we have to make. And to understand that our prayer isn't magic; it isn't a ticket into a charmed life, that in exchange for a heartfelt prayer, God will give us exactly what we want. But to understand that through prayer we are not alone in whatever decision we do make, God is working with us and with whatever we decide.

And finally, we have to place that decision within a larger framework, expanding our prayers beyond our own personal needs and desires, to put them into the context of the larger world. We may start with “I,” “me,” “mine,” but we don't end there. We pray for ourselves, but also for those we don't know. We are concerned about our families, but we pray also for other families, for their particular needs that we are unaware of. We are worried about our country, but we pray also for countries around the world, for all of God's people. We pray for Oconee St. United Methodist Church, but we pray also for the world-wide church, that universal church of Christ, in all its many manifestations. And finally we pray for the grace to be what Jesus wanted us to be and knew us capable of being when he first prayed that night so long ago – the bearers of memory and hope.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 83-85.