

Once there was a man who was in financial difficulty, and he walked into a church and started to pray. "Listen God," he said. "I know I haven't been perfect but I really need to win the lottery. I don't have a lot of money. Please help me out." He left the church, a week went by, and he hadn't won the lottery, so he walked into a synagogue. "Come on, God," he said. "I really need this money. My mom needs surgery and I have bills to pay. Please let me win the lottery." He left the synagogue, a week went by, and he didn't win the lottery. So, he went to a mosque and started to pray again. "You're starting to disappoint me, God," he said. "I've prayed and prayed. If you just let me win the lottery, I'll be a better person. I don't have to win the jackpot, just enough to get me out of debt. I'll give some to charity, even. Just let me win the lottery." He thought this did it, so he got up and walked outside. Just then the clouds opened up and a booming voice said, "John, I can't help you if you don't buy a lottery ticket!"

All joking aside, I think this little joke highlights how a lot of people approach prayer. Prayer is about God's activity not our, we need only to say our prayers and we've done our part. Prayer in this model is a passive activity where we expect God to do all the action. We are taught from an early age to pray for things: pray for God to give us things, to pray for healing, pray for others. Prayer it seems is often about getting something from God, or trying to convince God of something. So often we pray and pray about somethings as if the more we pray about it, the more we batter and batter at God he will relent and give us what we want. Don't get me wrong, persistence in prayer is a good thing, asking for things for yourselves and for others is a good thing. Both aspects are found within the Bible. After all Jesus explicitly says, Ask and you shall receive. In many of his letters Paul talks about praying without ceasing, about being utterly devoted to prayer. All this is true and good, but it doesn't get at why we pray, or what purpose prayer serves. So often we pray because we've always prayed, or because we are told it was a good thing to do when we were growing up, or because the Bible tells us to. All good reasons but they don't get at the heart of why we pray and what function it serves in the life of Christian discipleship. Our Gospel story today offers us a glimpse of how Jesus approached prayer, and how prayer can function in the Christian life.

At first glance our passage today seemingly has very little to do with prayer. As sometimes happens from time to time in the lectionary (particularly in the summer), our passage seemingly jumps around the sixth chapter of Mark giving us the trimming that surrounds other stories. Our passage begins with the disciples coming back from their mission that we heard about two weeks ago and leads us right up to the story of the feeding of the five thousand, and then skips that story and ends with another summary of Jesus' healing ministry in Galilee. It's a bit of a hodge podge, of a Gospel reading to be honest. So you might say what does this have to do about prayer? Right near the beginning of this passage is a little hint that runs through the Gospel of Mark. "Jesus said to them 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.' For many were coming and going and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves." These two lines from the beginning of the passage highlight the theme that is central to Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark, the tension between active ministry and withdrawing to deserted places to pray or recharge. Throughout Jesus' active ministry in the Gospel of Mark, he moves from ministry in the public sphere to the deserted place, he moves from action to contemplation, from prayer to action. Jesus' ministry is a dynamic interplay of times of seclusion, rest and contemplation on one hand and times of action on the other hand. Jesus' ministry begins with 40-days of preparation and prayer in the wilderness, and throughout his times he goes back to those deserted places to pray and to recharge. For Jesus prayer is a means to connect with God, his Father, and a resource that spurs him to more action. For Jesus prayer is the foundation of his life, and the life of his disciples and it cannot be divorced from the rest of his ministry.

There are two diverging pitfalls that we as the church can fall into around prayer. We can be all about action, we can be all about do do do without spending the time to pray, to discern God's will in

activity and to recharge or we can remain stuck in the deserted places, stuck in the belief that prayer is enough and leave the heavy lifting to God or to others. Both approaches grasp half of the truth of Christian discipleship. In the first we grasp the need to act! To respond to the needs and situations that we are faced with in the world without getting caught up in the details and planning. In the second instance we acknowledge the importance of connecting with God, of having those moments of contemplation and communion with God. The danger of the first approach is that we do things of our own will and direction and that we do not take the time to fill up our spiritual resources but rather risk fatigue and burnout. The danger of the second approach is that we never move to action, that prayer remains all that we do, and then we can become disillusioned with God because he seemingly doesn't answer our prayers.

Prayer needs to be the foundation of Christian ministry, but it cannot be the only part of Christian ministry. When Pope Francis spoke about World Hungry at the end of 2014 he said this "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. This is how prayer works." Prayer is not the recitation of magical words inviting God to change the world around us, rather it is invitation for God to change us so that we might encounter the world as agents of God's love and mercy. When we pray we need to be ready and willing to do something about the subject of our prayers. If we pray that someone might be comforted in their sorrow, then we need to be ready to walk with them, to support them, to grieve with them. If we pray that someone might be reconciled to us because they have hurt or offended us, we need to be ready to seek reconciliation, we need to be ready to offer them the reconciliation that we so dearly seek. Even when we pray for healing, we need to be ready for God to use us for healing, ready to use us as an agent of healing in the spiritual and communal sense. If we pray for the poor and hungry in our community, are we ready to act on those prayers? Are we willing to allow our prayers to be a foundation for our calling as Christians, are we willing to follow through on the prayers that we offer before God? Are we willing to buy the lottery ticket?

Jesus didn't see prayer and ministry as separable. They are both impossible without the other. We cannot authentically do ministry if we are not soaked in prayer, if we are not actively seeking to understand the will of God in the scriptures, in worship, in personal and corporate prayer. But we also cannot authentically pray, if we are not willing to act upon our prayers, if we are not willing to be the agent by which God answers our prayers. In my mind the primary purpose of prayer is to encounter the living God, to encounter him and to experience his abundant grace and mercy, with the express purpose of letting that abundant grace and mercy overflow in the way we live our lives and with our interactions with other people. In prayer we learn that we are loved by God, truly and deeply, and it is out of this love that we can love and serve the world.

We need our deserted places. We need those times to withdraw and to reconnect with the well of living water. But we cannot stay there, we cannot stay in the wilderness and commune with God. Even if we do stay in the wilderness, we discover that God does not remain there very long, he goes before us into the business of life in this world beckoning us to follow. If we remain in the deserted places in prayer, we miss the opportunity to witness the everyday miracles of the Church. We miss the opportunity to witness isolated people find community, we miss the opportunity to witness healing of mind, body and spirit. We miss the opportunity to see the hungry fed with good things and those who mourn comforted. If we remain in the deserted places, we miss the opportunity to encounter the fullness of the living God. My prayer for us all as we continue our walk with Jesus is that we might be able to live out the tension between living in the deserted places of prayer and the bustle of ministry in the world. Amen.