

One Difference Prayer Makes

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Isaiah 40:28-31, I Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39

Our first passage comes from the 40th Chapter of Isaiah. Writing to a community of exiles in need of a word of hope, the author here reminds them that the Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. Listen for the difference that Isaiah tells them waiting on God makes. *Read Isaiah here.*

Our second passage comes from the Apostle Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. Paul, addressing a squabbling group of believers in the early church, describes how he has tried to be all things to all people for the sake of communicating the good news of God's love. Forget about whether being all things to all people is advisable, admirable, or even possible. As you listen to Paul's words, I invite you to consider what gave him the desire to do so and the energy to even try. *Read I Corinthians here.*

Our final passage comes from the 1st chapter of Mark, verses 29-39. In this text, we pick up where we left off last week. Jesus' reputation as a healer has spread throughout the region. As you hear this passage, pay attention to how busy Jesus is. Listen for how he gets away in the middle of it all to spend some time in prayer. *Read Mark here.*

Occasionally, someone will ask me the question. "What is the biggest difference you've found between living here in McLean and where you used to live in North Carolina?" I usually reflect on the variety of ethnic restaurants, the great number of highly educated men and women with whom I spend time, the cultural opportunities that are available to me and my family, and my proximity to the privilege and poverty, the headiness and homelessness that exist so close together in the DC metro area. But, when asked to identify the biggest difference between living here and elsewhere, my answer is almost always the same, "I'd have to say it is the pace of life."

Isn't that one of the things that makes living in this area both exhilarating and exhausting? The pace of life here is ramped up. Everyone is on the go, go, go. That's life "inside the Beltway," living and working with and among people who are ambitious and driven, people who have places to go and people to see.

It's a fast-paced life around here. We all get caught up in it, from children to adults. You know how it is. There's always something more to do, one more thing to accomplish, one more item on the to-do list. There is the morning swim or hockey practice. There are the soccer games and band concerts, the business and school and church meetings. The calls to make, the reports to run, the briefs to prepare, the work to finish, the appointments to attend, the emails to answer, the meals to fix, the flights to catch, the plans to finalize. And if you think retirement will give you a break, the testimony of more than one retired person I know is that you might just find yourself busier than ever. The to-do list never ends. You're busy, busy, busy.

If the pace of life seems more accelerated here in Northern Virginia, it must be said that things are getting faster everywhere. Blackberries and laptops, ipods and iphones, cellphones, email and a host of other technological tools and devices have increasingly found their way into all but the most remote areas of our country and our world, increasing the speed at which we communicate electronically and affording us more and more opportunities to multi-task.

One consequence of this, I think, is that most of us, particularly around here, have at least a low grade case of “hurry sickness,” a term coined by cardiologists Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman in the 1950’s.¹ Friedman and Rosenman, you may know, were the ones who developed the concept of the type-A personality. Does anyone here know a type-A person? A key element of being type-A, according to Friedman and Rosenman, is “a harrying sense of time urgency.” James Gleick in his 1999 book *Faster*² diagnosed our whole society with pervasive hurry sickness: “a malaise where a person feels chronically short of time, and so tends to get flustered when encountering any sort of delay.”

I don’t know if Jesus was experiencing hurry sickness in the passage we read from Mark, but one could hardly blame him if he were. Now one of the things that makes Mark’s gospel different from the other three canonical gospels is its pacing. You can pick up on it in Mark’s use of the Greek word *euthus* - which is variously translated as immediately, just as, just then, at once, and as soon as. Here in the very first chapter, Mark uses the phrase *euthus* eight times. Things always seem to be happening immediately, at once. It’s as if the whole gospel has hurry sickness.

Take the first two verses of our passage. *As soon as* Jesus left the synagogue, they went to the house of Simon and Andrew. Simon’s mother-in-law was sick with a fever, and they told Jesus about it *at once*, and he healed her. The tyranny of the urgent, they call it. The word of what he’s done gets around quickly, so that by sundown, the whole city is gathered at the door of the place where he’s staying. They each have their needs, and Jesus responds to as many of them as he can - curing people, sharing the message, casting out demons, responding to seemingly endless human pain with a touch of compassion and grace. Talk about a to-do list. Jesus had a long one.

That’s what ministry in the name of Love is like, whether you happen to be ordained or not - and we’re all called to it. As inheritors of the Reformed tradition, we believe in the “priesthood of all believers”, the idea that all of us are called to some sort of ministry, some sort of work that we are meant to accomplish in God’s name.

When as a child of God, you become aware of human need, the extent of it never seems to quit. There are families in crisis in McLean and Anacostia, relationships that need to be mended both inside and outside of the church. There are at-risk children in the projects of Southeast D.C. and in the mini-mansions of Great Falls, in small towns in Peru and large cities in Kenya. There are lonely older adults at Chesterbrook and in lots of other places.

Whether it is poverty of material resources or poverty of spirit, it can be overwhelming to see how much lack there is in the world. Cancer, heart disease, and mental illness pop up everywhere. There is only so much one person can do to respond to these needs. But like Paul trying to be a Gentile for the Gentiles and a Jew for the Jews, there may be something in you that wants to be all things to all people.

To paraphrase a blues song I heard once, “You’re like a Mississippi bullfrog, sittin’ on a stump. So many needs, you don’t know which way to jump.” (Actually, the song said so many women, but hey, when you paraphrase, you can take some liberties!)

It is instructive, therefore, to watch what Jesus does in the middle of today’s passage from Mark. He just stops. He gets up early, goes out to a deserted place by himself, and there he prays. It’s not clear that he’s out there very long before Simon and the others come hunting for him, but he does take the time to get away and pray.

Bruce Douglass, in one of the marvelous classes on Reformed Social Ethics he taught for us over the past five weeks, shared with us how the Reformers began to disdain the monastic life. Once they had developed the Protestant idea of vocation, that God calls all of us (and not just the clergy) to use our gifts and talents for the good of the world, they started to look at a life dedicated to prayer as somehow escapist and less than worthwhile. They thought that the monks should be out there in the world doing something, producing something, making a difference, not just cloistered away in prayer. The Reformed tradition that is so much a part of me really resonates with that thought.

A part of our Reformed heritage is to value actively taking on problems in the world and trying to make a difference in a hands-on way. That’s why mission and outreach is so important here at Immanuel. It is true that our actions and not the words we throw up into the sky often provide the answer to prayer. But there is something terribly sad about the cartoon I saw in a professional journal for pastors one time. It shows a pastor, in her office, on her knees in a posture of prayer. Someone has opened the door to her office and is just coming right in. The caption says, “Oh good, I see you’re not busy doing anything important.”

Prayer is important. Worship is important. It may not feel like we’re accomplishing much when we take a little time out of each day to spend in prayer. It may feel like we could be getting something more done, helping people in a hands-on way with real human need. It may feel like we’re not accomplishing much when we take an hour or two on a Sunday morning to be in worship, study, and prayer here at the church. But prayer is the fuel that drives us, the break that centers us, the time away that helps us recall who and whose we are and what we are called to be and do. I love this paraphrase of what Martin Luther is purported to have said once. “The busier my day is, the longer I pray before getting started on it.”³

In the middle of a *euthus*, immediately, “life comes at you fast” world, Jesus took the time to pray. The text doesn’t give us the slightest clue as to what he said, but I can just see him out there, sighing deeply and catching his breath. “Okay, Father. Okay, God. I’m going to need your help here. A lot of people want a piece of me, a lot of people want a touch of Your hand. I’ve got a message to communicate. Remind me again why I’m here. Remind me again of the message that You gave me at my baptism. Remind me who and what I am supposed to be.”

That is one difference prayer can make. Whether it’s a devotional at the beginning of a day or at the start of a meeting; whether it is a quick pause during one’s lunch break or a lingering moment as you travel in your car; prayer is a chance to refocus, to re-center, to remember again who and whose we are.

There's no one right way to do it. The important thing is to do it, to get around to it, to take some time and try to tune in to the divine presence in your life. Prayer can be especially important when you feel harried or threatened.

In his book about Martin Luther King, Jr., *Bearing the Cross*, David Garrow tells of a time in King's life when many "strange voices" competed for King's attention - voices of fear, voices of doubt, voices of despair. It was during the Montgomery bus boycott. Violence had been threatened repeatedly against King and his family, and he was afraid. King was at home one night when, about midnight, the phone rang with yet another anonymous caller breathing murderous warnings. "If you aren't out of this town in three days (n-word), we're going to blow your brains out..."

After the call, King sat at the kitchen table worrying about the threat, about his children, his wife, himself. Then he prayed, prayed to God admitting that he was losing his courage, and as he prayed, he heard a voice, a voice he knew was the voice of God, for him the voice of Jesus. "Martin Luther," the voice said, "Stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world." Strengthened by the voice, Martin Luther King, Jr. knew which path to take and gained courage in his ministry. "Almost at once," he remembered, "my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared."⁴ Prayer can do that for us. As we refocus, re-center, and remember, we gain courage. I read something about that on a church sign once. *Courage is fear that has said its prayers.*

As I said before, there is no one right way to pray. It has often been helpful to me to read and reflect on a passage of scripture and then to fashion a prayer in response to it. Then there is the concept of a prayer mantra, or breath prayer. I had a chaplain in college who taught me what is known in some circles as the Jesus prayer:

Breathing . . .

| | |
|-----|---------------------------|
| In | <i>Lord Jesus Christ,</i> |
| Out | <i>Son of God,</i> |
| In | <i>have mercy on me,</i> |
| Out | <i>a sinner.</i> |

Steering away from too much emphasis on sin, I find other breath prayers even more helpful. Like this one:

Breathing ...

| | |
|-----|------------------------------|
| In | <i>Jesus Christ,</i> |
| Out | <i>Light of the world,</i> |
| In | <i>let your love,</i> |
| Out | <i>shine through me. Or,</i> |

Breathing . . .

| | |
|-----|----------------------------------|
| In | <i>Spirit of the Living God,</i> |
| Out | <i>present with me now,</i> |
| In | <i>guide, shape and use me,</i> |
| Out | <i>to embody Your love. Or,</i> |

Breathing . . .

| | |
|-----|------------------------|
| In | <i>Here I Am,</i> |
| Out | <i> speak Lord,</i> |
| In | <i>Your servant,</i> |
| Out | <i> listens.</i> |

It is worth noting here that Jesus went out to a deserted place to spend time in prayer. There aren't a lot of deserted places around here, but it is good to find a time and place apart. A corner of a room, some stolen moments during which no one can find you, some quiet time when you can mentally clear away the clutter and commune with God: these might be your deserted place. You may not even need to get away from other people, necessarily. For my part, I find some of my most effective spiritual reading gets done at Chicken Out. Maybe it is because I am away from my desk, but I also find that there is something about the noise and din of the other people in the restaurant that forces me to tune everything out and focus on what I'm studying. Prayer and meditation can happen in the unlikeliest of places. The important thing is to take the time to pray, to commune with God.

The season of Lent starts in a few weeks. Lent is a most appropriate time for us to rededicate ourselves to prayer, to taking on spiritual discipline. And to that end, the Christian Education Council will be making available a special devotional guide, a *40-Day Journey with Kathleen Norris*.⁵ Kathleen Norris, as you may know, is a Presbyterian elder, poet and author who has written personally and profoundly on the spiritual life and her practice of it - including the time she has spent in Benedictine communities. The C.E. Council and I are in hopes that all of us will buy a copy of this book and use it and its exercises through Lent so that we all share in a common experience. Dan has copies available, and I know he will be acquiring more. Again, let me encourage you to make a commitment to this through the season of Lent.

Don't forget to get around to it.⁶

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ I found the information on Friedman and Rosenman in an article on "hurry sickness" at the Word Spy website. The link can be found here: <http://www.wordspy.com/words/hurrysickness.asp>

² James Gleick, *Faster* (New York: Random House, 1999).

³ I've heard versions of this paraphrase in various sermons and lectures over the years. The exact quote, from one of his letters, I believe, is this: "Tomorrow I plan to work, work, from early until late. In fact I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer." You can find the cite here: http://www.famousquotesandauthors.com/authors/martin_luther_quotes.html

⁴ David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1986).

⁵ *40-Day Journey with Kathleen Norris*, Kathryn Haueisen, editor (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2008)

⁶ In an announcement at the 11:15 service, worship leader Betsy Lasher held up a posterboard disk that she called "a round tuit" and encouraged people to turn in their auction items before the following Sunday. I picked up the "round tuit" as the sermon closed as a visual aid.