Connecting With The Holy

I Samuel 3:1-10 Kimby Young

Luke 22:39-42 July 9, 2017

In my study leave last month, I went to the pastor’s school in Nebraska. I’ve mentioned it before. Two of the professors spoke about prayer and taught ancient methods of prayer, and we spent time practicing prayer much of the time. I was inspired to renew my own prayer life and to encourage growth in prayer in this congregation. Everything I am reading says that for a congregation to grow, to attract new members that congregation must have a rich spiritual life. Its members must be connected to God in profound ways. And prayer is a key to that. As I said with the children’s sermon, prayer is not only talking with God, it is listening to God. It is also just being with God, opening ourselves to a deeper relationship with God, letting God speak to and through us. One of the professors organized his classes into those three categories – talking, listening and being. Prayer is all about connecting with God, or allowing God to reach us. Prayer is about being with God, and being blessed by the presence of God.

The scripture from Luke for today is a common picture – Jesus going off to pray. This occasion happens to be on the evening when Jesus was arrested. But as I said, scripture says Jesus frequently went off to a quiet place to pray. After healing someone, before feeding the 5000, before walking on water, after teaching the “sermon on the mount” – over and over again scripture says Jesus went off alone to pray. It was a way of life. It was a pattern for every day – several times a day. Jesus prayed. Jesus spent time with God. That is our invitation – to take time, to make prayer a priority, to talk to God any time, every time we think of it. A lot of times people ask me “how do I pray?” The answer is – any way that feels comfortable to you. There are many many many methods of prayer people have developed through the years. And we will be exploring a few of those in the Wednesday groups. There are no specific words or ways. Just talk – plain language, straightforward ordinary talk. Talk to God as you would a friend. Talk to God as you would a parent. Talk to God as you would someone who loves you. Talk to God. Say what is on your heart – whatever is on your heart – even if that is anger or frustration or confusion or request or fear or emptiness. God wants to hear it. God wants to be with you. God wants the relationship. God wants the connection. Just like you would want to hear from someone you love. God wants to hear from you. So speak from your heart and know that God hears. And if you are not a word person – speak thru art or music or dance or work. Speak to God while you wash the dishes or drive or mow the lawn or do your daily work. Speak to God anytime, anywhere, any way you are able. God doesn’t care what you say. God just cares.

The harder part of prayer, for me, is the listening – the understanding of what God is saying to me. I sometimes have trouble discerning God’s answers. What is God speaking and what is just my own thinking? In the scripture for today from Samuel, the young boy Samuel hears God’s voice. I don’t know about you. I have never directly heard God’s voice in an audible way. I have understood God. I have heard God’s inspiration. I have followed God’s direction. But I have never heard an audible voice or seen a vision, dreamed a dream or had an angel visit. I suspect most of you have not either. So how do we know when God speaks? How do we understand what we are hearing from God? That’s not an easy answer – because it is different for everyone. It’s called discernment and it just takes time and practice. It takes someone like Eli who is experienced in listening to God to say – go back and wait for this to happen. It takes willingness, like Samuel, to do what his mentor recommended. It takes openness to God and a desire to understand. You see, God wants to reach us. God is not trying to keep secrets or test us. God wants us to hear and understand. God wants us to connect with God. God wants to be with us. So God will give you what you need to understand. It just may take some time.

And that’s hard for us too – that waiting to understand. We are a fast food, instant gratification, immediate action culture. We want it now and we want it our way. Prayer on the other hand takes patience and persistence, and it usually doesn’t come the way we want it to come or expect it to come. It takes practice. It takes trial and error. It takes intentional effort. It takes time. Sorry. I know we want it to be easy. And sometimes prayer is easy – understanding God’s will is easy. But sometimes it is not.

I started the prayer circles each Wednesday to give us a chance to practice prayer. I did it for myself – to be intentional about improving my own prayer life, building my relationship with God. You see, prayer changes throughout your life. There are deep seasons and shallow seasons. Sometimes what has always helped you to connect with God doesn’t work anymore. Sometimes you feel and know God’s presence so certainly, and then for no reason at all things change and you feel empty or lost. All the saints of the church say this. All the prayer warriors go thru dry periods. And they all say – just give it time. Just practice prayer and eventually you will open to new depth. And the silent periods will have purpose – which you can only understand after you get through it. Again – sorry it’s not easier. So I started the prayer circles for me, to go a little deeper into faith and to try to draw even closer to God. But I also started these groups for anyone who is interested in practicing prayer together, and for this church as a whole to enrich our spiritual depth – to help us grow. Everyone is welcome. Member or friend, young or old. And if you can’t make it during the times we are praying together – find your own time that works. Spend some time in prayer each week – each day if possible. Spend some time. Invest some time.

Really that’s what prayer is all about – investing time in your relationship with God. That’s the third aspect of prayer – talking, listening and being with God. Like any good relationship – there is nothing more valuable than just spending time together. It’s less obvious in our relationship with God. We can’t see God. So how do we spend time with God, especially if God is with us all the time anyway? It is not about God’s presence with us, it is about our awareness of God’s presence with us. Prayer is awareness of God. Prayer is about opening ourselves to God and connecting with God on a deeper level. Prayer is not a “results oriented” activity. It is not about accomplishing something. It is just about being – being with God, being who God created us to be, being aware of God’s presence with us, being ourselves.

In the story from Samuel, the boy says, three times – “Here I am.” “Here I am.” “Here I am.” He was willing. He was open. He was available. But still he didn’t understand – not until the time was right. Still God called again and again. Sometimes prayer is like that. But in the end Samuel understood quite clearly. And this is just the first time God spoke to Samuel – two entire books of the Bible are filled with revelations of God to Samuel who grew up to be one of the greatest prophets in the history of Israel. He heard God’s Word. He spoke God’s Word. He helped others to understand God. And it all started with a willing boy’s heart – “Here I am.” “Here I am.”

Your invitation this day, and in the week ahead – your invitation like old Eli to young Samuel – is to open your heart to God’s word for you. Find a place and time. Wait for God’s invitation. And say, “Speak Lord, your servant hears.” “Speak God, help us to understand.” Speak our God of grace, touch us with your presence and deepen our relationship with you. Speak God. Help us to hear.

And let it begin now. Let us pray.

Gracious God, in the days ahead, help us to pray. Help us to grow closer to you. Help us to speak, to listen, to be with you. We pray in Jesus name as Jesus prayed, by your grace. Amen.