

Title: Retreat!
Text: Mark 1:29 -39
Date: February 4, 2018

I am sure you are aware that Karl Marx referred to religion as **“the opiate of the masses.”** We have the vision of people being sedated to a point of not caring. In the same passage he writes, **“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature.”** It seems to me that Karl Marx grossly underestimated the potency of faith. That doesn't sound like Shepherdstown Presbyterian at all!

Perhaps you have also heard it said that some Christians are **“so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good.”** That doesn't sound like Shepherdstown Presbyterian at all! We *don't* want to be sedated into complacency, and we *do* want to be of earthly good. If anything, our unspoken battle cry is **“Charge!”**

In some respects we might be able to relate to the tempo of this first chapter of Mark that we have been in this past couple of weeks. While I haven't bothered to highlight it before, one curious word that keeps popping up is **“immediately.”** **“Immediately”** this happens, then **“immediately”** that happens. We have the casting out of demons. We have public healings. We have a private healing in a small home. We then read, **“That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door.”** (vv. 32-33) The needs are overwhelming! Time's a wastin'! Things seem to be moving along at a frenetic pace.

While today's passage could be the starting point for running in various different directions, I want us to focus on verse 35: **“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”** Isn't that interesting! With the needs of the world swirling around him, he got up early, went to a deserted place, and prayed.

I am certain there is a lesson in here for us. There is a lesson here for the good people of Shepherdstown Presbyterian who want to change the world. There is a lesson for us as we are in the process of being more intentional about doing the work of social justice. The needs are vast. The needs can be overwhelming. Yet we need to stay grounded.

People who care deeply, and feel deeply, can be very vulnerable. I remember being in my former church on the Sunday after the last presidential elections. You know those stickers that were often distributed at polling places? They were oval stickers with an American flag, and the words **“I Voted!”** Well this woman had an oval sticker with an American flag and the words **“I'm Terrified!”** And you know what? Beyond the concept of a cute sticker, this woman truly *did* look terrified. She looked horrified. She looked defeated.

I know people who were deeply involved in the peace movement during the Vietnam War who were ultimately burdened with depression. I know people who were giving their lives to working with homeless kids on the streets who were ultimately burdened with depression. Those who care deeply are at-risk. Activists of all stripes are at-risk. Just when we feel like we are making progress in race relations, there are set-backs. Just when we feel like we are making progress in caring for the environment, there are set-backs. Those who care deeply are at-risk.

We read that **“In the morning, while it was still very dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place.”** Do you think he set his alarm to get up early? I rather suspect he had a restless night, had trouble sleeping, and just knew in his soul that he needed to get away and find his center. If this was a need of Jesus, who are we to think we can function properly long-term without building time alone into our lives!

Last week a friend shared with me this wonderful quote from Thomas Merton: **“We have to remember that we look for solitude in order to grow there in love for God *and* in love for others. We do not go into the desert to escape people, but to learn how to find them: we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good. It is in solitude that illusions finally dissolve. He who is truly alone finds in himself the heart of compassion with which to love not only this man or woman, but all men and women.”**

Jesus apparently found that heart of compassion. We read that **“Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.”** Jesus answered, **“Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.”** (vv. 36-38) Jesus’ contemplative time away was not running away from ministry. It was equipping him for *further* ministry, and protecting him from being overwhelmed by the darkness in the world.

We read that Jesus **“went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”** What was that all about? Was he praying, “Dear God, please help Aunt Bertha recover from her fever?” Was he praying, “Dear God, please help Fred realize that his ego is getting in the way?” Was he praying, “Dear God, please change the Roman Empire so they might be nicer to poor people.” I rather suspect his prayer was of a different nature. We confuse “prayer” with “saying our prayers.”

David Stendl-Rast says, **“We must distinguish prayer from prayers. Saying prayers is one activity among others. But prayer is an attitude of the heart that can transform every activity. We cannot say prayers at all times, but we ought to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). That means we ought to keep our heart open for the meaning of life. Gratefulness does this, moment by moment. Gratefulness is, therefore, prayerfulness.”**

When it comes to prayer, some of you might be quick to point out the passage in Matthew where it says, **“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to [God], who is unseen . . . And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for [God] knows what you need before you ask him.** (Matt. 6:6-8)

So whether it is literally going into the desert, or literally going into your closet, find your deserted place. Learn to be comfortable there. Wait for the frequency of your soul to match the frequency of the Beloved.

In the account of Elijah's encounter with God on Mt. Horeb found in 1 Kings, chapter 19, we are told that it is in the sound of sheer silence that Elijah encounters God. Where is your Mt. Horeb?

Richard Rohr has written, **“Unfortunately, in the West, prayer has become something functional; something you did to achieve a desired effect—which too often puts the ego back in charge. As soon as you make prayer a way to get what you want, you’re not moving into any kind of new state of consciousness. It’s the same old consciousness, but now well disguised: “How can I get God to do what I want God to do?” It’s the egocentric self deciding what it needs, but now, instead of just manipulating everybody else, it tries to manipulate God.**

This is one reason religion is so dangerous and often so delusional. If religion does not transform people at the level of both mind and heart, it ends up giving self-centered people a very pious and untouchable way to be on top and in control. Now God becomes their

defense system for their small self! Even Jesus found this to be true of his own scribes, Pharisees, and teachers of the law."

John Main writes that ". . . prayer is *not* a matter of talking to God, but of listening to and being with God." He goes on to say, "**The really contemporary challenge is that we should recover a way of deep prayer that will lead us into the experience of union, away from the surface distractions and self-piety.**"

I know I have said this in the past at different times in different ways, but we need to get past any artificial dichotomy between the life of the contemplative, and the life of the activist. It is not either/or. It is both/and. There are both times to say "Charge!" and times to say "Retreat!" Yet the call to retreat, the call to find solitude in deserted place, is far from surrender. It is indeed what keeps us effective for the long haul in a battle with demons of all sorts.

Let me conclude with one last quote from Henri Nouwen: "**The spiritual life does not remove us from the world, but leads us deeper into it.**" May it be so.

Amen.

Mark 1:29 -39

Jesus Heals Many at Simon's House

²⁹As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³²That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

A Preaching Tour in Galilee

³⁵In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." ³⁸He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." ³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.