

Prayer was important to Jesus. Jesus prayed not so much out of obligation or custom, but more out of a desire to be with God. It was as much a part of his life as breathing. He couldn't live without it. I read through Luke's gospel and made a note of some of the times Jesus prayed.

Beginning with his baptism in the third chapter, Jesus made a habit out of praying. After he had been baptized by John the Baptist, Jesus **prayed**. Then two chapters later, Jesus came upon a man with leprosy. When the man saw Jesus, he begged, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do choose. Be made clean." Word spread about Jesus and many crowds gathered around to see Jesus. With all the pressure building what do you think Jesus did next? He withdrew to a deserted place to **pray**.

On another occasion Jesus entered one of the synagogues on the Sabbath and in the synagogue that day was a man with a withered hand. Long story short – Jesus healed the man, but healing, according to the Jewish law, was considered work and work was prohibited on the Sabbath. The scribes and Pharisees were furious with Jesus and began to put their heads together as to what to do about Jesus. Luke tells us Jesus then went to the mountain to **pray** and spent the night in prayer. When daylight came Jesus called his followers together and chose the twelve disciples. Jesus' life was wrapped in prayer. Perhaps the most powerful moment of prayer came when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was about to be handed over to be crucified. He took his disciples with him and asked them to pray as he went off by himself to **pray**. We are told that he prayed so intensely that his sweat became like blood falling down on the ground. To say that prayer mattered to Jesus would be a huge understatement. Prayer intersected different points of his life – after a **baptism**, after a **healing**, after a **conflict**, before a major **decision**, and ultimately before his decision to give his life for humanity.

So where do we find Jesus in our story today? You guessed it – praying on a mountain. This is the story of the Transfiguration and it is recorded not only in Luke's gospel, but also in Matthew's and Mark's. One difference between Luke's version and Matthew and Mark's is that Luke is the only one who said Jesus went up the mountain with Peter, James, and John specifically to pray.

February 18, 2007

Prayer is something all of us do. It is as natural as eating and breathing. One of the best definitions of prayer that I have run across is that it is a **conversation with God**. Just like we communicate with our friends on a daily basis, we communicate with God. Communication is a two-way street – talking and listening. We share with God and God shares with us. Now there is a huge difference in prayer as a formality and prayer in the truest sense of the word.

There was a family getting together for Thanksgiving one year -- aunts, uncles, grandmothers, grandfathers, babies, children, etc. The house was packed with people. The huge Thanksgiving feast was almost ready. You could smell the turkey and the apple pie in the kitchen. Just then Uncle Bob gathered everyone in a circle in the living room and said, “Before we eat, let’s pray.” Just as he began to pray one of the kids in the room made the comment: “Why do we just pray on Thanksgiving?” Prayer for some is just a formality. It means absolutely nothing.

I taught a Bible study several years ago and during the study the topic of prayer came up and in particular, prayer in schools. One man made the comment: “If we still had prayer in school then we wouldn’t have all the problems we are having with kids today.” His wife responded, “That’s funny because you never pray at home. Why should you expect the school to do it?” Good point.

The kind of prayer I’m talking about today is not the “Pastor open our committee meeting with prayer” kind of prayer. I’m talking about PRAYER. I’m talking about laying it all out there with God. I’m talking about being brutally honest and open with God and allowing God to shape us through our prayer. So many times we approach prayer the wrong way. We go to God with a list of errands and expect God to take care of each one according to our schedule. Or a crisis comes our way and we decide to pray. Remember on 9/11 how many churches and groups had prayer services? Churches all across this country were packed. I’m not knocking them because it was very appropriate for us to gather as churches and pray.

We should pray when terrible things like that happen, but I have a question for you, if we decided to host a prayer service tomorrow night in our sanctuary for no other reason than to just pray, how many of us would show up? We like to think that prayer is important to us, but sometimes I’m not so sure. Prayer, real prayer, is a way of life. Someone once defined prayer as “keeping time with God.” I can’t think of a better definition.

February 18, 2007

“Keeping time with God” means that we believe it matters that we spend time with God and that God actually cares about us.

In Philip Yancey’s book “Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference” Roy Lawrence told of an experience of prayer. Roy and his wife were associated with a group in England called St. Columba’s Fellowship. Its members consisted of hospice staff, nurses, and others who work among those who are dying. At one of the conferences Roy heard a hospice chaplain tell of a patient who asked to see him because he was in great emotional distress. He was in the last stages of cancer and was feeling guilty because he spent the previous night ranting, raving and swearing at God. The following morning he felt terrible.

The chaplain asked the patient, “What do you think is the opposite of love?” The man replied, “Hate.” Very wisely, the chaplain replied, “No, the opposite of love is indifference. You have not been indifferent to God, or you would have never spent the night talking to him, honestly telling him what was in your heart and mind. Do you know the Christian word that describes what you have been doing? The word is ‘prayer’. You have spent the night praying.”

Jesus went up to the mountain to pray and I can assure you it was not a formality. He knew the importance of spending time with God and was certainly not indifferent. Eight days before he went up the mountain with Peter, John, and James, he talked with his disciples about what discipleship and following him was all about. He said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” He was getting down to the “nitty gritty”. In other words, he was making clear to his disciples that being his follower would be demanding and that it would require sacrifice.

Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Lent and is a good time to refocus ourselves on what it really means to be a follower of Jesus. Historically Lent began as a period of fasting and preparation for baptism by converts and then became a time for penance by all Christians. During Lent this year we are going to focus on two things as a church: prayer and communion. We are going to share in the sacrament of communion more, and we are going to pray as individuals and as a community. We are going to “keep time with God.”

February 18, 2007

Speaking of spending time with God, what do you think it would have been like to have been in Peter, James, and John's shoes? Out of the twelve disciples, Jesus chose three to go with him -- Peter, James, and John.

My wife and I have two boys – ages three and almost six. Our youngest, Andrew, thinks that he should be able to do everything his older brother can do. If his older brother can jump off the couch, he can jump off the couch. If his older brother can tie his shoes, he should be able to tie his as well. Andrew wants to be like his older brother, and he just grins from ear to ear when Benjamin includes him in whatever he is doing. I have, however, found it more difficult to spend time alone with Benjamin and understandably so. If Benjamin and I are playing football in the yard, Andrew wants to be right in the middle of the action. He wants to feel included.

One day I took Benjamin to a football game and it just wouldn't work to take both boys. It was going to be a late night and Andrew wouldn't have made it past the first quarter. That set up quite a dilemma. How do we explain the situation to a two year old? I'm sure there are better ways to handle it, but I took the high road. I whispered to Benjamin, "When Andrew leaves the room, let's sneak out!" Benjamin and I tried to sneak out of the house without Andrew seeing us, but we were unsuccessful. Just as we opened the front door Andrew rounded the corner and asked, "Where are you going?" I then had a decision to make. Do I break his heart and tell him we are going to the game without him or do I suck it up and take him to the game and make the best of it? This thought did cross my mind – what if I said, "Daddy and Benjamin are going to the doctor to get a shot. Would you like to go?" I came close to saying that but then I would have to sit through an entire football game and answer this question over and over again, "Daddy, why did you lie to Andrew?" So I did what I didn't want to do all along. I told Andrew, "You can't go." I then spent the next ten minutes holding a crying two year-old attempting to rationalize with him. If you've ever tried that you how fruitless that can be.

I can just imagine the looks on the other disciples' faces as Jesus says to Peter, James, and John, "Hey guys let's go up the mountain for a little bit." Can you hear the disciples discussing the matter with one another? Judas turns to Matthew and says, "Can you believe this? They always get to go do the fun stuff? Why doesn't ever pick us? This isn't fair!" Whatever his reason, Jesus only invited Peter, James and John to with him up the mountain. When they reached the top of the mountain, Jesus began to pray, and **while he was praying** the appearance of his face changed, and his

February 18, 2007

clothes became dazzling white. Next thing you know it's the All-Star game of Biblical characters. The prophet Elijah and Moses show up on the scene and Peter, James, and John can hardly believe their eyes. Peter, James, and John were exhausted and had almost fallen asleep when all of this happened. If they were sleepy before they were not sleepy now. Standing right before them were Jesus, Moses and Elijah.

Just as Elijah and Moses were about to leave, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." I can't blame Peter in this case. It's like spending the evening with good friends at a lively party. Everyone is having a great time and has lost sight of the time. People are just enjoying the moment. Then one of the couples at the party says, "Well, we have to be going. Our babysitter needs to be home by 11:00 p.m." Then someone inevitably replies, "Oh, you can't leave now. The fun is just beginning. Can't you stay for dessert?" The fun was just beginning for Peter, James and John and they naturally didn't want the moment to end. Next thing you know God shows up on the scene. Now we have God, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah! From a cloud God said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Just after the voice of God had been heard, Jesus was found alone. Moses and Elijah were gone and the party had been broken up.

I imagine the three disciples' heads were spinning and that they all had that deer in the headlights look about them. What on earth do you do after something like that? You can't stay up on the mountain forever, so what do you do? You walk down the mountain and get back in the flow of regular, everyday life. For without regular, everyday life there are no "mountain-top" experiences in the first place, and besides that, it's in the valley that we spend most of our time. We would like to stay on the mountain top but life just won't allow it. Jesus himself went back down the mountain with the three disciples. He went right back into the mess of everyday life.

The very next day – the day after this great mountain-top experience – Jesus was met again with a pressing need. A man came to him and said, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son." His son was suffering from seizures and was foaming at the mouth. It was time for Jesus to get back to work in the valley. Perhaps our prayer today should not be, "Jesus, take us up the mountain," but instead, "Jesus, be with us in the valley as we seek to serve you faithfully in a messed up world." And in case you are wondering, a good way to do that is through prayer, or should I say, "Keeping time with God." Amen.