

January 15, 2017

“The Invitation”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Isaiah 40:28-31; Mark 6:30-31

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I'm sure you saw a couple of weeks ago the report about the Chicago special-needs teenager who was kidnapped and tortured and it was shown on a Facebook Live video. There are really no words to describe the depravity of this crime, but one thing is certain, it shows that the problem of racism and hate does indeed still exist in America. Be it those four young black people who committed this atrocity, or their white equivalent, Dylann Roof, who killed nine black people in a Charleston church last year, and whose sentencing trial coincidentally occurred on the same day of this torture. Now I don't plan to make any indictment of either blacks or whites today. The issue of racism goes far beyond what I can tackle in a twenty minute sermon. But I will say this... the problem stems from the lack of hope, the lack of education, the lack of upbringing, and the lack of God in the lives of so many. And I bring this up today, because as dire as the problem of race relations appears to be now, imagine what it was like fifty plus years ago, in the nineteen sixties and before, when the man our nation is honoring tomorrow, fought against racism, and for equality and freedom, for all of God's children, no matter what their color. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Professor Lewis Baldwin of Vanderbilt University, writes that throughout King's life, he always, inevitably, turned to prayer for his spiritual strength and fulfillment. In his book, *Thou Dear God*, on the prayer life of King, Baldwin tells that King always remembered “the "Person" his father used to tell him about, and the "Power" that can make a way when there is no way.” And just think about what King had to endure – verbal threats, physical assaults, arrests, jail time, crosses burning in his lawn, he was stabbed, and one night his home was bombed and set on fire. Baldwin relates a time King was sitting in the quiet of his home, reflecting on these ordeals, his thoughts and attention focused on the Person and Power that could give him the strength to carry on, and the help necessary to succeed. Sitting at his table, he bowed his head and prayed, “Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I am right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I am weak now. I am faltering. I am losing my courage. And I can't let people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak.” Then it seemed he could hear an inner voice saying, “Martin Luther King, 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.” King said he heard the voice of Jesus telling him to continue on, promising never to leave him alone. He said, 'Almost at once, my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared.'”

Now doesn't that make those words we heard from Isaiah today really hit home... "those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

You see, by all historical accounts, Rev. King was able to accomplish all he did because he trusted and depended on Almighty God for his strength and guidance. And he made it a point to find the time to enter into those quiet moments where he could be alone with God. In fact, one of his most famous quotes is, "To be a Christian without prayer, is no more possible than to be alive without breathing." "To be a Christian without prayer, is no more possible than to be alive without breathing." That shows you the value he put on prayer. Now I don't know all the problems and issues any one of you might be facing right now, though I'm pretty sure none of our homes have ever been bombed. And I certainly don't want to diminish any of the illnesses, trials or difficulties we may be struggling with. But I do want to stress the importance of coming to God in prayer. To trust that God will help you find a way when it seems there is no way. Listen again! "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth." Certainly, that same God has the power to help you if you turn to him in prayer.

However, too often, we never take advantage of this power because we never take the time to spend with God. To deliberately, seriously, spend quiet time alone with God. Because let me assure you, that good things will happen when you pray that won't happen when you don't pray. So let's try something. I want everyone to be perfectly still, close your eyes, and just listen for a moment. Go ahead. Close your eyes and listen closely. (Pause for at least 20 seconds.) Did you hear that? That...was the sound of 'quiet'. And, (although there was some extraneous noise here and there) some of you may have enjoyed this short time of quiet, and others of you may have felt a little uncomfortable. But in either case, I get the sense that sitting still and silent is not something we're used to doing. Which goes to affirm my suspicions that we, as a culture, don't do 'quiet' very well. Just think about all the noise and activity in our lives. I'm sure many of us wake up to the sound of an alarm, then we get up and turn on the TV, we get in our car and turn on the radio, and we work with music playing in the background. And, on top of that, we fill our days with all sorts of activities. Working, making a living, and all that entails. Keeping the house running with laundry, shoveling snow, cleaning, cooking, repairing. Playing taxi-driver for the kids and grandkids, caring for our aging parents. Then add the normal chores of food shopping, banking, oil changes, doctor's appointments, attending a meeting or two, socializing, and now there's hours of football to watch! I'm tired just talking about it!

Unfortunately, we've gotten to a point where we feel we have to do all these things if we're going to keep up with the people and demands of our culture. But remember, as Christians, we must be in the culture but not of the culture. So therefore, we must seek to follow Jesus' counter-cultural way of life. And we can start by accepting his invitation right from today's Scripture, where he says, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." Doesn't this sound wonderful? And this invitation for rest, quiet and solitude is one we hear in so many other parts of the Bible as well. "Come, lie down in green pastures, rest, rest beside the still waters." "Be still, be still and know that I am God." "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father alone, in solitude." "Come to me all who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest."

Yes, rest, quiet, solitude, prayer. They are things we yearn for and desire more of. And yet, isn't it ironic that God had to command us to rest and be quiet. The fourth commandment says, "Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord, you shall not do any work." Now the word Sabbath literally means, "stop, cease, desist." And I think God felt it necessary to command us to cease and desist, because He knew that otherwise we could easily get caught up in all those daily activities, and not take the time we need to stay connected to Him, to talk to Him, to listen to Him, to be blessed by Him.

And Jesus teaches us that a time of quiet and solitude with God should be practiced more than just once a week. It should be a part of the fabric of our lives. Just consider, Jesus' life was packed full of activities, too. And he knew if he was going to meet the activities and challenges of each day with joy and peace in his heart, which he did, then he would have to stay connected with God. He spent forty days and nights alone in the desert before he even began his ministry, to seek God's direction. He spent the entire night praying alone in the mountains before he chose his disciples, seeking God's wisdom. When he heard John the Baptist had been beheaded, he "withdrew in a boat to a place by himself" so that God might comfort him in his sorrow. Many crowds would gather to hear Jesus and to be healed, but, as Luke tells us, sometimes "Jesus would need to withdraw to deserted places and pray" in order to renew his strength. After a difficult discussion with the Pharisees, the disciples went home, "while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives," I'm sure to relieve his stress, and seek God's peace. After feeding five thousand people, he "went up into the hills by himself," I'm sure to thank God and reflect on God's power in his life. In the Garden of Gethsemane, before his crucifixion, he went alone to pray for the courage he needed to do God's will, to bear the burden of sin for you and me. Yes, Jesus knew the importance of rest, quiet and staying connected to God in prayer.

And, granted it can be difficult to make ourselves stop and be quiet. The sounds and activities of this world are compelling, alluring, promising. But they can also be oh so destructive. It's no secret that so many of us are worn out, not only physically and mentally, but more importantly, spiritually. Because we feel that being busy is being productive. It's like the story about two lumberjacks who challenged each other to an all-day wood chopping contest. The first man worked very hard, not even stopping for a break. The second man had a leisurely lunch and took several other breaks during the day. At the end of the day, the first man was surprised to find that he had lost. The second logger had chopped substantially more wood than he had. "I don't get it," he said. "Every time I checked, you were taking a break, resting, yet you chopped more wood than I did." "Ah, but you didn't notice," said the winning man, "that when I sat down to rest, I was sharpening my ax." And that's exactly what we do when we sit down to rest with God. We sharpen all aspects of our lives by staying connected to God. That's why Jesus invites us to "come away," out of the world, and re-connect, with the Person and the Power who can help you find your way. To hear that still small voice of God speak personally to us. To open our hearts and minds to hear His wisdom about decisions we need to make. To feel His comfort when our hearts are heavy. To find His strength to face the trials we will inevitably meet. Yes, quiet time alone with God is where we find all that we need to meet the activities and challenges of each day with joy and peace in our hearts.

And so this week, I'm going to extend to you Jesus' "invitation." You'll find it in Pastor Rebecca's reminders in the bulletin. Between now and next Sunday morning, you will have six hundred and seventy two fifteen minute periods of time. And so the invitation is to take just one of those periods, or a little over one tenth of 1% of your time this week, to give to God in quiet, rest and solitude. Is that asking too much? I think we'd all agree it isn't. So, "Come with me all by yourself to a quiet place and rest awhile" Now, again, close your eyes and listen, really listen, for the still small voice of God. (Silence again.) Amen.