

## THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | FEBRUARY 4, 2024

ISAIAH 40:21-31 | PSALM 147:1-11, 20c | 1 CORINTHIANS 9:16-23 | MARK 1:29-39

There's a scene in *The Sun Also Rises* where one character asks another how he went bankrupt. He replies, "Two ways. Gradually. Then suddenly."

This is also how the ministry of Jesus spreads in Mark's gospel. Gradually at first. And then in today's gospel reading, very suddenly. One day, Jesus is calling disciples, going to synagogue, and healing a man. And now, here's how Mark describes Jesus's ministry. "That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons."

The need is, apparently, infinite. And so Jesus now finds himself in a situation that we might find ourselves in, too. Where you could always be doing more. Where you're never really done.

So when Jesus wakes up early and sets off on his own to go pray, it strikes those around him as odd. Simon and his companions start to hunt for him. The tone Mark uses here suggests this wasn't just curiosity about where Jesus went. *Where'd he go?* It was about finding Jesus so that he could come do more work. *Get back here.*

And yet, right as his ministry and fame is beginning to spread, Jesus takes time to step away and pray. It seemed weird to Simon and the other disciples. And it might strike us as strange as well.

We often imagine Jesus as a kind of superhero. That Jesus has endless energy, endless power, endless drive. Jesus is the light of the world, and he suffers no risk of burnout. And so when Jesus steps away or does something that we don't feel is productive or does something that we think isn't a good use of his time, we—like Simon and the disciples—might start hunting after him. *What's the deal?*

But remember that for Jesus to be fully divine doesn't mean he has to be less human.<sup>1</sup> It simply means that his life is completely open to and sustained by the love of God. And so even as we confess that in the creeds that Jesus is "God's only Son," that still means that Jesus has a relationship of daily dependence and reliance on God. Jesus is not a superhero. And so even Jesus, God from God, Light from Light, True God from true God, that Jesus, still prays.

And it's probably not a coincidence that the first time St. Mark tells us about Jesus praying is right after he tells us about the immense need there was for his ministry. The scope of need and Jesus's need for prayer—not to mention our need—these two things go together.

Thérèse of Lisieux, the great French mystic writer, has this great image of prayer that she talks about in one of her books. She picks up an image from the Psalms about how prayer expands the soul.<sup>2</sup> And because she's writing in French, the word she uses for "expand" is "dilate." Prayer dilates the soul. We might say that prayer dilates the heart.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the non-competitive agency/space idea that you get in Austen Farrer and Kathy Tanner. The point is just that Jesus isn't 50% divine and 50% human. Divinity and humanity aren't oil and water.

<sup>2</sup> I think you also get this image in Bernard and Teresa of Avila.

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If you've gone to a movie recently, especially a matinee, maybe you've had that experience where you leave the theater and it's all great. Until you open the door and step outside. And then what happens? The sun hits your eyes, and you swear it's twice as bright as it normally is. When you're in a dark theater, your pupils dilate, they get really big, because it's dark, and they need to let more light in. But when you get outside, it's too much.

Thérèse's idea is that we spend a lot of our lives like that. We encounter the world around us and we think, "It's too much." It could be what we see on the news. Wars, famines, displacement. It could be what the people around us are dealing with. Cancer, estrangement, meaninglessness. It could even be what we're dealing with in our own lives. The stuff we try not to think about too much but that wakes us up at 3 AM.

Sometimes it's too much because we just can't deal with it all. But sometimes it feels like too much because we can't do anything to make it better. Our hearts, our attention, our abilities are all limited. This is just part of being human. But God's love and care are infinite. God's giving knows no ending. There's no situation, no life, no context that exists apart from the heart of God.

So when we pray, Thérèse says, we're not just presenting God with a list of items that we'd like to have fixed. But we're also asking God to dilate our hearts. To help us stay open to the lives of those around us. To help us love the world the way God loves it.

There's a great hymn by Ruth Duck in our new hymnal supplement about this. And the chorus of it goes, "Spirit open my heart / To the joy and pain of living / As you love may I love / In receiving and in giving Spirit, / open my heart."

This is a more helpful way of thinking about the way that Jesus prays in today's gospel reading. At a moment when the seemingly infinite needs of the world start to press in on his ministry, Jesus wakes up early. Not so that he can get a jump on his to-do list. But so that he can ask God to keep his heart open to bear the sorrows of our world.

And it helps us think about the role of prayer in our own lives, too. There's a very shallow debate that pops up occasionally about the relationship between prayer and action. On the one hand, there are some people who think that any time in prayer and contemplation is a waste of time. It's not efficient. You could be doing something useful.<sup>3</sup> And on the other hand, there are other people who think that once you've prayed about something, you can just move on to the next thing. Once you've prayed, it's not your problem anymore.

For St. Mark and Thérèse, prayer and ministry are not in competition with each other. They are like the two feet you use to walk. One foot is not in competition with other. They work together. Back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth. And this is the same way prayer works in the ministry of Jesus and in our ministry together as Christ's body.

With opened hands, we receive God's blessings. With opened minds, we discover how we can best serve the needs of our neighbors. And with opened hearts, we can love the world the way Christ loves it.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>3</sup> Ironically, these folks seem to spend a lot of time tweeting.