

Lonely Places

February 5, 2012

Mark 1:29-39

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 sundown, 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. 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.

Earl Woods knew what he wanted to do the moment he saw his son take his first swing at age two. He was going to turn his son into the best golfer of all time. Tiger made his first appearance on national TV at the age of four. Tiger had an incredible amateur career and he turned pro at the age of 20. He landed \$43 million endorsement deal from Nike almost overnight.

Woods drew record crowds and proved himself a winner on the course. People around the world were enamored with Tiger, they couldn't get enough of him. His relationship with his father and the story of his father's passing endeared him even more to his adoring public. He landed more sponsors, married a beautiful Swedish woman, had two perfect children. He told Ed Bradley on "60 Minutes" he had his priorities in place, "Family is my top priority."

Not too long after that he stood in front of the press and confessed, "I was unfaithful. I had affairs. I cheated." Devastated and broken, Tiger talked about addiction, treatment, and years of lies and deception. "I hurt my wife, my kids, my mother, my wife's family, my friends, my foundation and kids all around the world who admired me," he said.

You could almost hear the collective gasp, "No! Not Tiger!"

Sports commentators turned to social scientists for an explanation. Why would the highest-earning pro-athlete in history, with a beautiful wife and young children, do such a thing? Dr. Ronald E. Riggio said the answer relates to the dynamics of power. "Powerful people, including famous leaders, will take risks - sexual affairs, engaging in illegal or unethical behavior - simply because they can. Being powerful and famous means that others are willing to do almost anything for them. They become "intoxicated" by their power. They believe that the rules that govern other people simply don't apply to them - what philosopher Terry Price calls "exceptioning." This is why celebrities and powerful politicians believe that they should "get a pass" when breaking the law or engaging in some other sort of social violation. And this gets reinforced because the devoted followers of the rich, famous, and powerful are all too willing to do whatever it takes to please the powerful person." He concludes that humility is the only antidote for this tendency of leaders and powerful people to think that the rules don't apply to them. (Published on December 3, 2009 by Ronald E. Riggio, Ph.D. in Cutting-Edge Leadership)

In our scripture reading for today, we this great seduction begin to surround Jesus. His fame spread throughout the land. The **whole city** was gathered around the house where Jesus was working his miracles. **Everyone** was seeking him out. He had all the makings of a superhero. He had power and a following. He was the big story of the day. Then suddenly his disappears. Everyone starts to wake up after a long night of cures and exorcisms

and Jesus is nowhere to be found. People start lining up for just a moment of his time, just a touch of his hand, just a glimpse that they might be healed and Peter has to report to them, "He's gone."

As readers of the story we are privy to Jesus' whereabouts. We know that long before dawn, while it was still dark, Jesus left the house to go to a deserted place to pray. It's likely he had to tip-toe over a sea of sleeping folks hoping for their turn with Jesus. No doubt, he saw the desperation of their situations. Surely his compassion taunted him, "You are just going to leave?" "You are going walk away from all these people who need you?" "You are the only one who can save them..."

Jesus went to a deserted place to pray and we are left to wonder, "Why?" Why did Jesus need to pray? What did he pray for? The gospels don't tell us much about the content of Jesus' prayers. We do know that when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray he taught them the Lord's Prayer, "...thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...lead us not into temptation..." And we also know Jesus' agonizing prayer in the garden, the one he prayed just before he was arrested, "Not my will but thy will be done." Both of those prayers reflect the fundamental struggle in each of us to do what we want over what God wants. After all, aren't we all tempted in one way or another to do what is easy, what feels good, what makes us feel special or powerful? Don't you think Jesus was tempted with this same struggle? He was human, after all.

So he stepped over that needy crowd and did what he knew he had to do so as not to get seduced by all the trappings of success – he humbled himself and prayed. "Not my will but thy will be done." Jesus understood that the demons he faced in lonely, deserted places were the same ones he faced each day; celebrity, power, to not trust God. He prayed because he knew he was not above succumbing to any of these temptations. He prayed as an act of humility. He prayed to stay the course with integrity. He was busy, he was needed, he was exhausted, and yet, he prayed.

At different points in my education I learned about the desert fathers. The desert fathers were men (and a few women) who, starting in the third century, chose to remove themselves from society and live unadorned lives in the desert. Some lived as hermits, some lived in little communities, with little or no comforts in pursuit of a deeper union with God. Over time, the desert fathers, came to be known as wise people from whom people would seek advice. This was the beginning of what is called the "monastic movement" and what we know as monks in the Christian tradition.

One well-known desert father was Evagrius Ponticus. He was a well-educated Christian that rose through the ranks of church leadership after Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire around the late 300's. He served the church in the worldly city of Constantinople (like we might think of Las Vegas as a worldly city). He received high praise from his peers which stroked his ego to enormous proportions. He became infatuated with a married woman. He had a vision about being confronted by this woman's husband and was disturbed by his own weakness to temptation. He left Constantinople and went to Jerusalem to stay in a monastery – but even there he could not escape his own vainglory and pride. He became gravely ill and only after he resolved to become a monk was his health restored. He spent the rest of his life in the desert.

On the surface it looks like he took the easy way out. Instead of facing temptation and resisting it, he ran away from it. What could possibly tempt you in the desert? Evagrius learned that the same things that tempt you in the world, tempt you in deserted places. Because Evagrius was so articulate and highly educated he was able to chronicle what he and other monks discovered in their life of prayer. "The most prominent feature of his research was a system of categorizing various forms of temptation. He developed a comprehensive list in 375 AD of eight evil thoughts, or eight terrible temptations, from which all sinful behavior springs. This list was intended to serve a diagnostic purpose: to help readers identify the process of temptation, their own strengths and

weaknesses, and the remedies available for overcoming temptation.” (Wikipedia on Evagrius Ponticus) It was his conviction that these thoughts should be dealt with in prayer before they begin to “linger” or stir up one’s “passions.” In other words, deal with the temptation rather than suffer the sin.

The eight bad thoughts may sound familiar to you because they later devolved, sadly, into the seven deadly sins. Over sixteen hundred years old, the words seem contemporary and indeed they are. They reflect the timeless human struggle with demons: (The following are taken from “The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer” published by Cistercian Publications, 1981)

- Gluttony – the thought of one’s stomach, the thought of a long illness, thoughts of scarcity, these are the concerns of gluttony
- Impurity – impels one to lust after bodies and it seems to go after those who practice self-control
- Avarice – the love of money stirred by fears of poverty, disability, and having to depend upon others for your basic care or needs
- Sadness – a longing after what is gone and what you cannot have
- Anger – the most fierce passion is anger and it is the boiling and stirring up of wrath against who has given injury or is thought to have done so. It constantly irritates the soul when present.
- Acedia – sometimes called the “noonday demon” is the one that causes the most trouble of all according to Evagrius. Hatred for place, hatred for manual labor, hatred for life itself are the calling cards of Acedia. We might use words like apathy, boredom or when you don’t care that you don’t care.
- Vainglory – when we seek the praise and recognition of others.
- Pride – pride comes when we forget that God is our strength and salvation – when we think that we alone are responsible for the good we do.

The early church called these “thoughts” demons. In prayer one observed his or her interior and spontaneous thoughts. In prayer, one was able to recognize a temptation before it became a sin.

Jesus was human. He was tempted. He was humble enough to know that is a condition of being human. He was humble enough to pray – to go to God with the hard work of battling our demons so as not to inflict them on others.

When Peter finally found Jesus we sense that he is exasperated with Jesus. Out of breath, desperate to find him, he yells at Jesus (just like the demands of our day yell at us). “Everyone is searching for you.” “Everyone needs you.” “Everyone is waiting on you.” “Everyone.....”

“No,” Jesus said, with the strength that one can only find in prayer, “it is time to move on.” “Not MY will, but THY will be done.” So many prayers sound like letters to Santa.... “Give me, give me, please, please....” Maybe we can think about prayer a little differently today...as a time when we humbly face the temptations to do our own thing, our own way, in our own time.

“Early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up and went to a deserted place, and prayed.” If Jesus needed to pray, what about us? Not a morning person? That’s not the point – the point is that Jesus carved out time to be alone and pray. Temptations are real. No one is exempt. And so we follow the example of Jesus and pray.