

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is a forty-day period between Ash Wednesday and Easter, excluding Sundays. It is a time of self-examination, self-reflection, repentance, and spiritual growth for Christians. Every so often as Christians we need to take time, pause, and reflect on our personal relationship with the Lord. Lent is a time for questions such as: "Who is Jesus Christ to me? What is my personal relationship with Him? What must I do to grow closer to Him during this time?"

In a way, Lent is a time in which we can get ourselves in better shape spiritually. This is a lot like spring training where baseball players are gathering right now in Florida and Arizona to get in shape for the upcoming season. Now I love baseball and have been looking forward to this season. Someone once said that baseball is the only orderly thing in an unordered world. If you get three strikes, even the best lawyer in the world can't get you another strike. The late great Yankee catcher Yogi Berra said it best: "Baseball is 90 percent mental and the other half is physical." Yogi also said: "Little League is a very good thing because it keeps the parents off the street." You have to love Yogi's sayings!

Pat and Mike, both in their 90s had played professional baseball together, and after they retired, had remained close friends. Pat suddenly fell deathly ill. Mike visited Pat on his deathbed. After they talked for a while and it became obvious that Pat had only a few minutes to live, Mike said: "Listen old friend. After you die, try and get a message back to me. I want to know if there is baseball in heaven." With his dying breath, Pat whispered: "If God permits, I'll do my best to get you an answer." A few days after Pat died, Mike is sleeping, when he hears Pat's voice. Pat says: "Mike, I got good news and bad news. The good news is there is baseball in heaven. The bad news is you're scheduled to pitch tomorrow's game."

I love playing baseball, watching it, and coaching it. I enjoyed coaching my sons when they were growing up. They both started out in T-ball, and then my younger son Ben played baseball all the way through high school and even tried out for the team at Vanderbilt University. And now I have had the privilege to coach both of my grandsons Trevor and Logan, and this season, along with my son Ben, I will be coaching Logan's Little League Team.

As I have coached my sons and grandsons, I must have said a thousand times over the years: "Keep your eye on the ball." The batter hears this at every ballgame from the coaches, parents, and fans. In Logan's league, the players pitch, and he hears it from his dad and me all the time. I know that he is getting tired of it, but that's the key to being a good hitter, seeing the ball. Other phrases players hear a lot are "look the ball onto the bat" and "see the ball, hit the ball;" eye-hand coordination is essential to good hitting.

At one time or another, most of us have tried to hit a baseball with varying degrees of success. Hitting is sort of an art. You have to keep your body – hands, head, shoulders, and feet in the proper position, and then as the ball is delivered by the pitcher, swing at the right time keeping your eye on the ball. For great hitters, the ball almost slows down because they can pick-up its speed and movement so well. They are able to hit it because they see it clearly.

Now if every pitcher just threw fastballs, hitting would be a lot easier and more people would be playing professional baseball. In the movie *Major League*, there is a scene where a player who is trying out for the team is hitting the ball out of the park on every pitch. The manager turns and asks his assistant coach why this guy was not already playing in the major leagues. The assistant then signals for the pitcher to start throwing change-ups, off speed pitches, instead of fast balls. The batter misses every pitch, just swinging at the air. He could not hit curve balls or change-ups. He could not see the ball clearly.

You know life does not always go the way we want it to. At times, life throws us change-ups, curves, and occasionally inside fast balls that knock us off our feet. I once sent one of my sons a card that said: “When life throws you a curve ball, hit a home run.” When we keep our eyes on Jesus, we can also hit a home run and endure anything that life throws our way.

Do you see Jesus clearly; do you have a clear understanding of who He is and what He can do for you? Sometimes we can't see Jesus because of all the things that are on our minds. We let the problems and demands of everyday life get in the way of seeing Jesus as we should.

Spring training is a time when the baseball players try to get in shape and make the major league baseball team. In a way, Lent is like spring training for Christians. Just like baseball players who need to practice their hitting and fielding to sharpen their skills and get ready for the upcoming season, so each Christian needs to take time out to grow in their faith and their walk with the Lord. In the same way, Lent is an excellent time for us to sharpen our skills and get ready for whatever life throws our way in the coming months and years. So, during Lent this year, I want us to focus on some of the spiritual disciplines that we should be practicing each and every day if we are to grow closer to the Lord in our personal relationship.

So, let's start our discussion of our spiritual practices this morning in the Gospel of Mark. Mark is believed to be the first gospel written, and as you read it, you realize that things are happening fast in Mark; he is definitely a man of few words. For example, in the first chapter, he moves quickly from the baptism of Jesus to His temptation in the wilderness to the calling of His disciples in just twenty short verses. In the story this morning that Rev. Kathy discussed last month, Jesus had gone to Capernaum and taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath. The Bible tells us that He taught with such authority that the people were amazed. During the service,

Jesus is confronted by a man with an evil spirit which He casts out again to the amazement of the people.

In Mark's bang-bang style, Jesus and His disciples leave the synagogue and go to Simon Peter's house where they find Peter's mother-in-law in bed with a fever. Jesus takes her hand and she is immediately healed and prepares a meal for the disciples. That evening after sunset, the local people bring their sick to Jesus to be healed. Mark tells us that the whole town gathered around Jesus.

I give you this background so that you can see how busy Jesus was and the demands that were being placed on Him early in His ministry. So, how did Jesus handle the stress and all the daily demands for His time? What was His secret? I believe that one of the answers for Him and for us as we face the demands of daily life is found in the first chapter of Mark, verses 35-39.

Read Mark 1:35-39

In our text this morning, Jesus gives us a model for handling the pressures and demands in our daily lives. This model offers us a way to manage our time, to handle the stresses and demands that we face each day. When verse 35 rolls around, we find that Jesus was able to stand up under the pressure because He cultivated a daily quiet time. Jesus carved out time in His busy schedule to talk with God each day, and in a way, to have His battery recharged so to speak. As you read this scripture text and other passages in the Gospels, you find that Jesus made it a habit to rise before dawn and go to a deserted place for His daily quiet time. He always found a time and a place to be alone with His Father.

It is in these "alone times" with God that we can reflect on all that is going on around us. It is in these "alone times" with God that we allow God to speak to us about balancing the priorities and demands of daily life. It is in a quiet time, before the alarm clock goes off, the radio blasts, or the phone starts ringing with demands and problems from the outside world that we can get our marching orders and strength from God. It is in our solitary time with God that we receive our daily road map enabling us to stay focused on those things that Jesus wants us to do. In addition, we will also discover those things that we really don't need to worry about or do; things that we can leave for others to do.

Verse 35 gives us insight into what was a great priority for Jesus, the renewal of life in time alone with God. Our Lord not only made it a habit of regularly attending public worship, but He also set aside time to be alone to chat with God. With Jesus, this was not just a time for prayers, but it was a time to gather His thoughts, to understand His Father's will for His life, and to re-energize Himself both spiritually and physically.

Think about it, here's the Son of God, for whom nothing was impossible, needing to get away by Himself to spend time alone in thought and prayer with His Father. If Jesus needed this, how much more do we need to set aside time each day with the Lord? Jesus knew all too well that He could not live without God; that if He was going to be able to help those who came to Him, then He must have time alone with His Father to renew and re-energize Himself.

I consider a daily quiet time essential to my spiritual growth and personal relationship with the Lord. This is a habit that I hope and pray that you all will develop if you have not done so already. If you put the effort into it and stay with it for at least six weeks, it will become a habit – a habit that you will never want to break. I started setting aside time alone with God back in 1987 and it has become a daily routine. I started out allotting 15 minutes of my day, and over the years it has grown, I am now up to an hour and a half. To be honest, I cannot start a day without my daily quiet time. It is the first thing I do each morning. I joke that I start each morning with the Bible and a Mountain Dew.

So, what is a daily quiet time and what does it consist of? The two essential elements are prayer and reading the Bible. I usually start with prayer and then I use four devotional books which give me a variety of Bible passages from both the Old and New Testaments. Over the next two Sundays, we will discuss our time of prayer and Bible reading. In the time we have remaining, let's discuss some general guidelines for our daily quiet time.

First, let's look at the time when Jesus prayed. It was in the morning, the morning after the Sabbath day. Jesus did not just pray during the one hour of worship on Sunday morning. He spent time alone with the Lord each and every day. John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, wrote: "He who runs from God in the morning will scarcely find Him the rest of the day."

Second, it was early; I mean really early, it was still dark, before sunrise. While others were still asleep in their beds, Jesus was praying. Now I realize that some people are not morning people like me. There are some of you like my wife Judy who are more willing to stay up for breakfast than get up for it. The point is that we should find the best time of each day for spiritual renewal when our bodies and mind are the most fresh and awake. We must choose a time when we are most alert and ready to listen to God. For some of us it is not late at night when we become zombies and cannot stay awake. But for you night-owls, it is the perfect time. The exact time is not as important as the actual practice of taking time to be alone with God.

Finally, our scripture text tells us that Jesus went off to a deserted place. Another translation of the Bible says He went to a solitary place. The *Message* tells us that Jesus went to a secluded spot. In other words, He went to a private place where He would be alone, free from external noises and distractions. Jesus frequently prayed alone separating Himself from every earthly

distraction. We need to select a quiet place, a room or corner in our home, in the yard or garden, or somewhere we can regularly meet alone with God. For example, I go to my office each morning before Judy gets up and before I turn the computer on. Remember this is time alone with God. You can't do it while watching TV, surfing the internet, or staring at your smartphone. If we are really to hear God, we must remove all external distractions and clear our mind. We need to be like Samuel when he encountered God; "Speak Lord, your servant is listening."

It should be noted that Jesus prayed briefly when He was in public. He prayed a little longer when He was with His disciples, and He prayed all night when He was alone. Today, many people tend to reverse this approach. Next Sunday we will discuss prayer in more detail.

A student asked his rabbi why God did not give Israel enough manna for a whole year at one time when they were crossing the wilderness, instead of each morning. The teacher replied: "I will answer you with a parable. Once there was a king who gave his son a yearly allowance, the entire sum on a certain day each year. Because of this, the father only saw his son once a year. So, the king changed his plan and gave his son just what he needed for each day. Thus, the son started visiting his father the king each morning; it was a time of fellowship, guidance and love for both father and son. This is why God gave the Israelites manna each day, and why He wants to meet with us each day."

Jesus, our Lord and Savior, handled the demands of everyday life with a daily quiet time with His Father. If this was necessary for the Son of God, how much more must it be necessary for us? Do you have time for the Lord? He has time for you and desires a daily chat with you. Find a solitary place and make it a habit of spending some time alone with God each and every day; you won't regret it. He's waiting to meet with you. Amen