

**The Need of Prayer**  
**Mark 1.29-39**  
**February 7, 2021**  
**Black History Month begins**  
**Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church**



**Mark 1.29-39**

**Jesus Heals Many at Simon's House**

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. <sup>30</sup>Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. <sup>31</sup>He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. <sup>33</sup>And the whole city was gathered around the door. <sup>34</sup>And 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.

**A Preaching Tour in Galilee**

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. <sup>36</sup>And Simon and his companions hunted for him. <sup>37</sup>When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' <sup>38</sup>He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' <sup>39</sup>And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

[*Teach Me to Fly* by Mark Miller]

*Like a bird who is fallen*  
*I rest in your hands ...*  
*Fill in the pieces*  
*Never fully there.*

Thank you, Athena and Eric. That's my prayer this morning. May my unfinished words be filled in by the Spirit at work in your own hearts.

I'm wondering how the passage Pastor Patricia read for us at the beginning of worship strikes you. Jesus and his four followers leave the synagogue and retire to Simon and Andrew's house where Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. They tell Jesus about this immediately and he takes her by the hand and lifts her up and "the fever left her, and she began to *serve them*."

What's new, right? This poor woman gets up from her deathbed to wait on these men.

But wait a minute. Dr. Ofelia Ortega says: "her service cannot be understood as a woman's menial work under the domination of lazy males, but as true ... ministry."

To “serve” is the same word used in the previous story about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. And angels came to “minister” to him.

In other words, Simon’s mother-in-law’s encounter with Jesus makes her the *minister – the pastor* – for Simon and Andrew, James and John, and for Jesus himself.

And history bears this out, Dr. Ortega says. Remember that Mark is writing to those earliest communities of Jesus scattered all over the region – “house churches” that meet in homes where women like Simon’s mother-in-law are the presiding pastors.

There would be no surprise for Mark’s first readers that she was healed and then “served” them. That wasn’t a sign of taking her assigned subservient place as a woman. This was the recognition of the prominent role women already had as pastors in the life those early communities of Jesus.

And I like to imagine that, as a good pastor, Simon’s mother-in-law goes to Jesus and says: “Look, Jesus, you have expended all this energy in healing people and freeing them from the powers of oppression. It will take its toll. I’ve got this. Why don’t you spend time alone with God.”

And I can imagine this because the next thing that happens in the story is:

*In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ Jesus said, ‘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.’ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in the synagogues and casting out demons.*

Jesus went to a place where he could be alone with God and he prayed.

I’m guessing the idea of being alone right now isn’t a happy one. We have had enough of being alone in this pandemic time.

But praying is another thing.

As we begin this Black History Month, I’ve been noticing how many of the old and new spirituals we love have to do with prayer. They are *about* prayer or they *are* a prayer.

Athena and Eric sang this prayer “Teach Me to Fly,” by Mark Miller, one of the most outstanding Black hymnwriters and arrangers of our time.

In the text for this morning, Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law by “taking her by the hand and lifting her up.” And we might think of “Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand; I am tired. I am weak I am worn.” The Thomas Dorsey prayer hymn that was a favorite of Dr. King and Mahalia Jackson.

This is a Communion Sunday and we might think of “Let us break bread together on our knees ... when I fall on my knees, with my face to the rising sun, O Lord have mercy on me.” That’s a prayer from the Gullah slave culture of Southeast colonial America.

Even “We Shall Overcome” is a kind of affirmation and a prayer: “We shall overcome *someday*.”

And then, at the end of the service we will hear “Somebody Prayed for Me” by Dorothy Norwood, another contemporary Black gospel writer who, as a child, sang with Mahalia Jackson.

And let’s not forget: “It’s me; it’s me; it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.”

There is all this prayer in African American spirituals.

And I wonder.

If you look around at the world and you see never-ending oppression and intentional disadvantage and violence based on the color of your skin, prayer – appealing to a higher power, above the powers that be, to heal and free and overcome – makes a lot of sense.

Here’s the question I am asking myself this Black History Month: If I were really standing in solidarity with people of color; if I were really doing the work of Jesus, would I be spending more time in prayer?

We have Cherry Johnson to help us explore the various kinds of prayer. But I ask myself this question because I am beginning to wonder if the biggest hindrance to my prayer life is my privilege.

Why pray? I’ve got it covered. Just because of the color of my skin I have pretty much automatic access to the resources I need. I am more likely to get vaccinated. I can stay safe at home because I have one and because I can work from home.

If I were really standing in solidarity with people of color and doing the work of Jesus, wouldn’t I, like those great spirituals I love, be spending more time in prayer? Wouldn’t I be driven to my knees to cry out “have mercy?” Wouldn’t I be actively asking for prayer because: “It’s me; it’s me; it’s me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.”

I find myself thinking about Marion Sutherland today. Some of you knew her. She was so impressive - so graceful and elegant. When she was a student at the Historically Black, Howard University in Washington D.C. she got to hear the great Howard Thurman preach.

Eventually, she made her way to Seattle and joined Seattle First Baptist Church. She loved music and started a youth choir with her kids Chrystal and Clyde. She even served as the interim Sanctuary Choir Director for a while.

She was president of our congregation at one point and held local and national offices in American Baptist Women and American Baptist Home Mission Societies.

She also served as the Western area Director of the Links, a prominent African American sorority.

But having done all of that, and serving in all those roles, Marion was committed to prayer. At her memorial, Chrystal listed some of Marion’s favorite Bible verses that included Philippians 4.6-7: *Do not worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your request be made known to God and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

Marion would send me notes from time to time, letting me know that she was praying for me, and sometimes making suggestions about music in worship. She was very focused on one particular request: that before Communion we sing “Pass me not O gentle Savior; hear my humble cry; while on others thou art calling; do not pass me by.”

It’s a prayer – as if to say, it doesn’t matter who you are or how recognized you are or whatever power you think we have, we come to the Table together in the humility of knowing that we need each other and we need that power greater than our own.

So, in honor of Marion, we prepare to share Communion this morning with the music of prayer: “Pass me not, O gentle Savior, hear my humble cry.”

[Following Communion]

“Somebody prayed for me.” I think we can be sure that, when Jesus was alone in prayer, he wasn’t just praying for himself. He was praying for all those folks who would be coming to him with their broken bodies and broken lives. And he was imagining them whole. He was imagining them restored in their relationships. He was holding them in the light of love and justice, grace and peace.

Those early house churches were convinced that they could make it through because Jesus was in heaven praying for them.

So, I invite you to imagine this morning that it is not me offering this blessing. It is Jesus saying:

May God bless you and keep you

May God’s face shine on you and be gracious to you

May God’s presence, which is already within you,

Surround you and go before you in peace.

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES:

“Mark 1.29-39,” Ofelia Ortega, *Feasting on the Word*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), pp.332-336. Marion Sutherland is included in the older history of Seattle First Baptist, *Our First Baptist Heritage (1869-1984)*, pp. 74-76.

NOTES for music included in today’s service provided by Music Minister, Ben Luedcke.

Adolphus Hailstork is a black composer and educator from New York, and in addition to composition, has studied the violin, piano, organ, and voice. Adolphus obtained his Bachelor of Arts from Howard University, a Historically Black College in Washington D.C., and in the 1960s and early 70s, he overcame widespread institutional racism, going on to secure a master’s and a doctorate from Manhattan School of Music and Michigan State University. He has held faculty positions at several American universities and he is a Fulbright Scholar and has composed music for solo instruments, chamber ensembles, choir, orchestra, and opera. His opera *Joshua’s Boots* aims to tell the untold story of the role and importance of Black settlers in this country’s western imperialist expansion. Likewise, his opera *Rise for Freedom* depicts John P. Parker, son of a white father and black mother, who bought his freedom and was a leading conductor on the Underground Railroad. Both these large works are meant to be educational and appropriate for all ages. Other notable works include his *Three Dunbar Hymns*, with texts by Paul Laurence Dunbar, one of the first black poets to garner critical acclaim while addressing the inequalities and oppression of black Americans.

[From his website.] “Mark Miller Mark serves as Assistant Professor of Church Music at Drew Theological School and is a Lecturer in the Practice of Sacred Music at Yale University. He also is the Minister of Music of Christ Church in Summit, New Jersey. Mark received his Bachelor of Arts in Music from Yale University and his Master of Music in Organ Performance from Juilliard. Mark is a lifelong United Methodist. Mark believes passionately that music can change the world. He also believes in Cornell West’s quote that ‘Justice is what love looks like in public.’ His dream is that the music he composes, performs, teaches and leads will inspire and empower people to create the beloved community.”

Dorothy Norwood is an American gospel singer and songwriter who began touring at the age of eight, and in 1956 began singing with Mahalia Jackson. Her career in gospel music and ministry now spans five decades.