

Listen to Your Children Praying

Meditation on Mark 1:29-39

Feb. 4, 2018

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sunset, 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; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he 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 to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He 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.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Kent Whitaker lay in his hospital bed fantasizing about vengeance on the man who had broken into his home, shot him in the chest, and shot and killed his 51-year-old wife, Tricia, and 19-year-old son, Kevin.

He kept replaying the event in his mind, seeing the vague, ski-mask-wearing figure inside his darkened home. "All I could feel for this man was an incredibly deep and powerful hatred," the 69-year-old Houston man says in a Feb. 2 story in *The Washington Post*. But he was a

Christian and he knew the Lord wanted him to forgive.

Bible verses pushed into his thoughts, but brought little comfort. “We know that in all things God works for the good of those that love him,” he remembers. And, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”

So he prayed.

“All I could do was ask God for help,” he says in a Jan. 12 story in *American-Statesman*. “When I did, the strangest thing that ever happened in my life occurred. I felt a warm glow flow over me. It lasted only a couple of seconds, but when it left, all the desire for revenge, all the hatred disappeared.”

Police initially believed that the Dec. 10, 2003 shooting was the work of a burglar interrupted during a break-in. But it was Kent’s older son, Bart, shot in the arm to divert suspicion, who had orchestrated the shooting with two friends. One was the getaway driver and the other pulled the trigger.

On the night of the shooting, Bart invited his family to go out to dinner with him to celebrate his upcoming college graduation. But he wasn’t attending college. He wasn’t even enrolled—something he had hidden from his parents. It was a ruse to get them out of the house so that his friends could enter the house and lie in wait for their return.

For seven months after the shooting, Bart lived at home with his father, despite the police telling Kent that his son was a suspect and that his life may be in danger. Bart continued to deny involvement in the shooting and Kent didn’t know what to believe, at first. He told the police, “If I see something, I am going to tell you. But I am not going to

abandon my son. I am going to stand with him through all of this even if he's responsible."

Bart was convicted of 2 counts of first-degree murder and sentenced to death. His motive, the prosecution maintained, was a million dollar inheritance. His two friends were also convicted. The shooter was sentenced to life in prison. The getaway driver got 15 years.

Before the shooting, Kent had a good relationship with Bart, he says. They enjoyed long-distance bicycling-- sometimes going on 100-mile hauls together. "Tricia and I were active parents," he says. "We didn't ignore things."

Bart has struggled to explain why he did what he did. Untreated mental illness is the most likely explanation. "I wanted revenge for being alive," he told 20/20 in 2009. "And I blamed them for that. I blamed them for who I was instead of blaming me." He went on. "In order for me to be the person that my parents would love or that they did claim to love, I had to be better than I was...There was an idealized version of me and then there was me... So every time I failed at reaching that goal of mine, I felt like a failure."

The plot with his friends was like a game of chicken, he said. He was waiting to see "who would back out before the final act." No one did.

Bart, now 38 years old, has been a model prisoner on death row. He earned a bachelor's degree in English literature by mail, his father says, and is close to finishing his master's degree with Cal State. But his thesis is in committee and probably won't be cleared before he dies. The school has promised to award his degree, even posthumously.

His execution is scheduled for Feb. 22.

Kent and members of his wife's family are urging prosecutors to choose a life sentence instead of the death penalty. But time is running out. He says he can't imagine "the last living part" of his family executed by the state. He says that his wife and other son would not have wanted Bart to be executed.

Kent says, "I have seen too much killing already."

Hearing Kent's story brought tears to my eyes. It confirms what we know to be true—that mental illness even strikes good, Christian families, with parents who love their children. Mental illness, in its many forms, is often a chronic disease that those who suffer with it -- and those who love them—will have to deal with for the rest of their lives. Mental illness may have a genetic component and can run in families. While medical research has greatly improved diagnosis and treatment over the years, there's still so much the medical community doesn't know. But this we know for sure---left untreated, mental illness may devastate people's lives.

Still, Kent's story brings me hope that families torn apart by violence and wounded by mental illness can find healing, wholeness and purpose for every day through their faith and by serving the Lord.

Simon Peter's mother-in-law, living in his household, is suffering from a fever and bedridden in the first chapter of the gospel of Mark. What we would call a "shut-in" today, she misses Jesus' teaching in the synagogue, when the people are amazed at his authority, unlike the

scribes, and his power to cast the demon out of a man. In Peter's day, people believed that fevers were caused by demons. This is why we hear how the fever "left her" when she experiences healing with the touch of the Master's hand.

No words are uttered in this healing scene, though we know that Simon and Andrew speak to Jesus about Simon's mother-in-law as soon as they enter the home. This is a sign of their hope and faith that Jesus, indeed, can heal the sick and cast out demons, as they witnessed in the synagogue and will see many times as they follow Christ.

Her response to her healing is that she is compelled to serve the Lord, not because he tells her so, but because she is happy and believes that Jesus has made her well! Scholars say she becomes the first "deacon"—waiting on the Lord and his followers. If only the Bible would tell us her name!

After Jesus casts the demon out of the man in the synagogue and heals the women with a fever, word gets out. The next thing we know, "the whole city" comes to Simon Peter's home. Jesus casts out demons and heals many more.

What follows is the most important thing--what I want you to remember from this message—the importance of prayer for God's children. For God listens when we pray and he desires that we pray. Jesus rises early, while it is still dark, and without telling anyone where he is going, he walks to a deserted place to be alone with God. Even the Son of God needs the power of God for wisdom, healing, love, mercy and grace.

Only after prayer alone, in a deserted place, is Jesus empowered to

obey God's will. As he teaches on the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:5-7 that when we pray, it shouldn't be as the hypocrites do—all show and fancy words to impress people. “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Jesus says to Simon and the others when they find him, “Let's go to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” Everywhere he goes, Jesus transforms lives—preaching, healing and casting out demons.

Christ's Spirit continues to transform hearts and lives today. We learn from Christ's example that to make time to be alone with God in prayer is to be empowered to love, heal and proclaim the message of hope we are called to do. From Kent Whitaker's testimony, we know that God can grant us the power to do what we cannot do in ourselves, including the power to forgive someone who has taken the lives of our loved ones.

The bedrock of the clemency petition filed for Bart Whitaker is Kent's forgiveness that came as a gift when Kent prayed. The petition argues that Bart has “changed his life” on death row. It includes multiple letters from death row inmates arguing on his behalf. One inmate says Bart has a “special affinity for helping guys with mental illness.” Another says Bart has an “uncanny ability to calm others on death row” and has inspired him and others to better themselves. Another says, “He is one of the best liked inmates on this farm by the guards and other inmates, and he has worked the hardest to rehabilitate himself. Killing him would

be a crime because the system needs men like him out on the farms keeping everyone calm and looking forward.”

Kent says he is proud of the man his son has become in prison. If the Feb. 22 execution date is not lifted, Kent promises to be there, behind the glass partition at the Huntsville death chamber.

“As he goes to sleep, I want him to be able to look at me, “ Kent says of his son, “and see that I love him. I really want him to know that I forgive him.”

Let us pray.

Loving Lord, we thank you for your mercy and grace--for forgiving us for all our sins, when we have done nothing to deserve your forgiveness. We confess that we have judged others as more sinful than ourselves and refused to forgive others when they have hurt us. Thank you for listening to your children when we pray and for your desire for us to come to you so that we may be empowered with your gifts and able to do your will. We lift up those in prison now--inmates and guards. We ask that you draw them closer to yourself and that your Spirit would do its transforming work. And we pray for Kent and Bart Whitaker and their family, that they would be comforted and healed, your justice would be done, and that your love would reign in every heart. In Christ we pray. Amen.