Sermon – March 25, 2018
Susan Gascho-Cooke, with Mark Clatterbuck and Darrell Yoder
Mark 14:32-42
Prayer as Staying With

Stay with me, remain here with me,
watch and pray … watch and pray …

So, here we are on the sixth Sunday of Lent … a season when the church universal invites and reminds followers and seekers alike to engage in intentional practices—to open our selves and our lives to God.

Here at CMCL we have looked at this theme, "Holding Space in Our Lives For God" each Sunday during Lent:

We looked at practices that involve the setting aside of time
We looked at the practice of gathering together regularly
We looked at the practice of singing with and singing together
We looked at practices that involve the setting aside of physical space
We looked at practices that involve the movement of our bodies

Today we look at practices of prayer. You may be wondering why we are not focusing on the triumphal entry story this morning. This Palm Sunday of all Palm Sundays, when likely many of you actually were out marching less than 24 hours ago here in the streets of Lancaster, waving posters of many colors, shouting words of peace, following the lead of our nation's and our own community's youth.

Many of your daily lives are deeply entangled with the politics of our day, whether in social or environmental activism or, quite unusually for a Mennonite congregation, at least historically, helping to get a Mennonite elected to a national office (and yes, three of the candidates in the upcoming Democratic and Republican primaries for the 11th district House of Representatives race are from Mennonite background, so technically, I'm not making any partisan assumptions from the pulpit about you who might be supporting!).

These are fascinating times, and there would be much to learn from the triumphal entry story this morning. But such fascinating times as these are also exactly when we must remind ourselves to deepen rather than set aside our attention to the spiritual practices that keep us grounded in our faith, the practices that keep us always re-calibrating ourselves to be in tune with God.

In exactly such times as these, we do well to remember that after his march, Jesus asked his disciples to stay with him in presence and prayer. And he asked that his followers' presence and prayererful staying-with transfer from him to the least of these after he was gone. They are, in Jesus' own words, his post-Easter embodiment, and the ones whose bodies are on the line.

It is in that spirit that we turn our attention this Sunday to practices of prayer.

One of the resources I turned to, in preparing for today, was the book Seven Sacred Pauses, by Macrina Wiederkehr (whose writing was also shared by Malinda last week). In this book, Wiederkehr invites modern readers to consider ways they might bring the practice of "praying the hours" into their lives.

There are Catholic monastics who have, for thousands of years, have practiced stopping for prayer throughout the day, and by "day," I mean the 24 hour cycle of the day—waking to pray at midnight and 3 a.m.

Today, I have invited Mark Clatterbuck and Darrell Yoder to share along with me. Mark I invited because I wanted him to share about the ways he has been shaped by monastic prayer traditions over the years. Darrell, I invited because when I heard him first tell his story, I thought immediately of the gospel story we read this morning: when Jesus slipped away to pray as he awaited his betrayal and arrest and trial and crucifixion, there he

beseeched his disciples to stay with him—to stay awake with him as he prayed; to keep vigil … Gethsemane is a Holy Week story, just as much as the triumphal entry, and Darrell will be sharing about a much more recent experience of the accompaniment of friends on a long night.

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Mark Clatterbuck:

I was twenty-three years old when I first met St. Benedict, the Italian spiritual genius who wrote the famous "Rule of St. Benedict" for Christian monks about 1500 years ago. At that time, I was studying church history as a young graduate student and had become totally infatuated with the lives of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the Church.

At first my fascination with monks was merely academic. I hung out in libraries and archives studying their lives, writing term papers, and devouring their stories. But then one day I saw a road sign for St. Procopius Abbey while driving near Chicago. With no particular plan in mind, I turned up the driveway and walked inside. When this Pentecostal kid wandered wide-eyed into the silent, cavernous foyer of the monastery and approached the first monk I saw, his question to me was a fair one: "Are you lost, young man?"

In a way, I was. But in another way, I had accidentally found my home. For the next year, I attended Sunday evening vespers with these white-haired Catholic brothers, chanting the Psalms, sharing meals, and learning about life among a monastic community.

During that stretch of time, I seriously considered taking vows and becoming a monk. Until I met Malinda—at which point I decided to take different vows—vows no less serious, but far less celibate, among other things.

However, at the end of that year praying with the monks, I did bind myself to Benedict in a ceremony that made me an Oblate of St. Benedict—which means I live as a lay member of the Order who intentionally follows the principles of Benedictine life without taking vows & while living outside the walls of the cloister.

So for the past twenty-five years, I've carried around my pocket version of the Rule of St. Benedict and worked to integrate the wisdom of this ancient Christian tradition into my own life and decision-making.

Here are a few principles have been especially important to me.

1. First and foremost, Benedict stressed the importance of living in community.

The solitary men and women of the Egyptian, Syrian, and Palestinian deserts—with their incredible stories of fasting and self-deprivation on top of pillars, or deep in caves, or suspended from trees, or holed up in abandoned desert forts—often steal the show in books about early Christian ascetics. But Benedict argued that the strongest kind of Christian disciples are not the loners, but those who choose the path of journeying together. In his famous "Rule" for beginners, he describes intentional Christian community as "the workshop of the soul" – a beautiful metaphor, I think.

As a person who's naturally inclined to turn inward & live a somewhat solitary life, I learned from Benedict that there's no substitute for the hard work that intentional community demands. For while the solitary life affords us the luxury of escaping our weaknesses by ignoring them, or imagining them away, intentional community forces an unavoidable confrontation with our own selfishness, jealousy, indifference, lack of compassion, and self-importance.

Belonging to community keeps us honest—not only toward ourselves, but also to speak the challenging word to others whose growth we're also responsible to nourish.

2. The second principle I've learned from Benedict is something I call "moderated radicalism."

Here are the vows that Benedictine monks take: poverty, chastity, and lifelong stability to a community.

It's hard to imagine a vision of the well-lived life that's more counter to the American Dream, with its unabashed pursuit of wealth, obsession with sex, and narcissistic individualism.

In short, Benedict calls for a profoundly counter-cultural lifestyle.

And yet, compared to the dessert-wandering, tree-hanging, cave-dwelling solitaries that surrounded him, Benedict's model of disciplined, daily, cloistered togetherness was—in a way—downright boring.

But I wonder if, maybe, this was the single most brilliant aspect of Benedict's vision: that he insists, over and over again, on wedding the radical and the ordinary, the sublime and the mundane.

Social activism, at its core, is precisely this: a decision to reject prevailing social norms & declare, as Jesus did, that our world can look differently than it does right now—and that we're the ones who can effect this transformation by God's grace—even while planting our feet, every day, in the dusty soil of this imperfect world. It requires a pairing of unrelenting idealism with unflagging pragmatism, day in & day out, just as Benedict taught.

3. The third lesson I learned from Benedict is found in the motto of the Order: ora et labora. "Prayer and work."

While growing up, my early training in Christian faith drew stark lines between spirit and flesh, soul and body, the "things of God" and the "things of the world."

Benedict rejects this dichotomy, pushing, instead, for the re-integration of sacred and profane, divine and human, godly and earthly.

Benedict insisted that, properly understood, one's prayer and work are two halves in a single motion. This is why he taught that every task in the monastery was sacred. The gardener, the chant leader, the gatekeeper, the abbot, the cook, the guest master, the wine maker—all perform the work of God. Because every task, done well and freely and joyfully, is a Divine offering.

All of these principles—the imperative of community, the courage to be an ordinary radical, and the sanctity of one's work—have deeply informed the path of community organizing & activism that I've chosen to follow alongside my family.

Thanks largely to Benedict's teaching, I regard the activism I do not in addition to, or in tension with, or separate from, a life of prayer. It is, itself, the prayer.

And the community formed in the struggle for justice is not merely incidental. It is sacred space, the workshop in which the Christian life is truly lived.

This afternoon, Mennonites and UCC'ers and Quakers and Buddhists and Reform Jews will join a vowed Order of Roman Catholic Sisters at a chapel in the middle of a holy cornfield that's been desecrated with a fossil fuel pipeline—to wave palms, sing songs, and openly defy an industry for which nothing is sacred but profit.

In my mind, this is radical community incarnate—the kind of integrated community of faith and action, prayer and work that would, I hope, make Benedict proud.

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Darrell Yoder (transcription of sharing during service)

There's a radio show on Saturday night to replace Prairie Home Companion and it's called, Live from Here, and in the show there's a storyteller who his tagline is, "I have" – like he does all these inappropriate things, and he says, like "Have you ever done such and such things? I have". So on October 16, I went to the Chapel, and I didn't know what was happening – I was just invited to go – I did something totally, totally inappropriate. I found out from my son, Joshua, who is much wiser all about protests and all of such things, that I was very inappropriate. When Chris Pyfer, Officer Pyfer, came up to arrest me, and put the handcuffs on me, I reached out my hand, I said, "Welcome" and he didn't have anything to

do, but he had to shake my hand, because that's just what happens when somebody says, "Welcome" and holds out their hand. And he shook my hand, and then he put the handcuffs on me. He did it gently—he did it very politely. He called me Mr. Yoder – I mean, Mr. Yoder, over and over, like I was his dad, or maybe even a grandpa. He made sure I didn't stumble going down to the police car. He was like, "Do you think you can make it down here? Or should we go around?" "No, no, I'll be fine." He opened up the door, said, "Don't bang your head," and I mean, I really felt like I was being well taken care of. It was this very strange, strange meeting of two worlds – this young man w ho looked like my good friend and I's son Eli. And he was being—doing his job—and I was doing something that you're not supposed to do. You're not supposed to willingly putting your hands into handcuffs.

The day went on. It got really rather long. Malinda said something this morning about do we ever get grouchy – our response was, "Uh, yeah!" Well—how many of you get grumpy when you are hungry? It's kind of, "Uh, yeah." Because I was getting grumpy and I was getting tired. A part of the day, I was in a jail cell with Jerry Miller, who I was very glad for. If you are ever gonna be in a jail cell with somebody, Jerry Miller is a good person to be in a jail cell with. He's been in some before, and I hadn't, and it was good spending time with him. Malinda was somewhere—I don't know if she was in the next cell down, or the next cell down, but we could hear each other, and I think you could hear me humming, and you were like, "What are you doing?" and it was like, "I'm singing to myself." Cause that's a way of prayer, making up a song—a kind of humming song.

Driving to church today—did any of you, in your head, do the Winnie the Pooh song that he did with Piglet? None of you did that? Do you know the song? Well—your part is tiddlely pum. The more it snows, the more it snows, the more it goes on snowing. So I was doing that in the jail cell. I was doing my humming song, and hearing Malinda down there. And getting to Lancaster County prison, there was a real change when we got picked up by the Sheriff's Deputy. It was no longer, "Officer Pyfer" "Mr. Yoder – are you okay?" It wasn't that way at all. Instead of putting the handcuffs on real gently, it was slap cuffs, and you slap it real hard, so the force spins it around—it hurt. The way he did the body search – it wasn't comfortable. There's a way they're supposed to check your scrotum, and there's the way that he did it, and it wasn't comfortable. And then getting to Lancaster County prison—there's a whole system; very much is—some of us were allowed to keep our sock after we turned them inside out; some of us weren't. We were put in rooms and the food was there—I guess it was edible—I ate part of it. Making a phone call wasn't an option, even though we thought it should be. But there was still this whole sense of – within our group of 22 of us, I guess – 21 out of the 23 that were arrested that day – there was still this real sense of calm and peace and I credit you, Malinda, for that. There was a woman that was arrested, and she is a person who has very strong opinions that I've experienced in the past in a negative way, and after the whole experience was over, she talked about, she has never in her life experience something like that: a sense of calm, a sense of peace. I don't know that she used the words, "a sense of prayer," but for me that was very much a sense of prayer. But that starts to wear thin when you're hungry and you're cold, and you sleep on the cement floor for a while, and then you can't lay there any longer so you get up and somebody else lays down to sleep on the cement floor while you are watching what's going on.

The guards—I don't think realized how much you can hear in the holding cells. You can hear pretty much anything they're saying. The one young man – I would guess he's 35 – he was like, "What in the bleep is going on?? We've got a retired minister, we've got a minister, we've got a retired schoolteacher – what are these people doing here?!? I'd rather deal with hardened criminals!" Because every time the door would open, Malinda or someone else would be, very politely, saying, "Why are we being treated this way? Why are you trying to take away our humanity?"

At some point, and I don't really know the time, we were taken through the prison to meet with a Judge (and my group, we were meeting with the Judge on video), and so they put a heavy leather belt on us, and the buckle was in the back, and then in the front was a

ring and then our hands were handcuffed so that we were like this, going through the cell. I've had some experience being in monasteries in Egypt and it just reminded me of—so there we are, going to pray, in the middle of the night—this long line of monks. It didn't take a lot of imagination to think that you're in an old, stone church somewhere when you're in the basement of the prison and going to pray. And it was very much that experience, but it did get really long.

There was a man who came in in the middle, after the shift change, and he was doing our fingerprinting. And I was talking to him and he said, "Oh, you're the group." And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "When I came to work tonight, there was a whole group of people out there in the parking lot. And I was like, 'what are all of these people doing out there in the parking lot?'" And it was wonderful to hear that there were people out there in the parking lot because they had not let us make a phone call, we didn't know if people knew where we were or not where we were, and it was just really wonderful to go back to the cells and tell people, "They know were in here, I mean, there's people out there, waiting for us, out there, waiting for us!" We got out at different times—I think I got out at like 2 a.m. with the group, and there was people there with food and water and a ride home and hugs, and it was just really neat to have them there.

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Thank you so much, Mark and Darrell.

A third CMCLer has agreed to share this morning and that person is Lila Garber. Today she is with Monte Garber and Marcy Hostetler, her son and daughter-in-law, as Marcy's family holds memorial services for her mother. What Lila shares with us this morning is the artwork on your bulletin covers.

This morning we actually have five bulletin covers. You can look at one another's after the service, and try to collect all 5, if you like!

Lila and I were, serendipitously, both present at one of Brenda Sauder's art journaling sessions a few weeks ago, and we were practicing Zentangle together. Zentangle is a contemplative art practice in which you, essentially, doodle – make repetitive designs.

Lila shared with us that she had experience with Zentangle, and then told us the story behind it. Lila is a talented artist – in drawing and watercolor, and often spent hours in the basement studio in their home. In the last year of her husband, Daryl's, life, his oncoming dementia made it very hard for him to tolerate being alone, even alone in a room when Lila was downstairs in another.

So, Lila chose to keep vigil with Daryl. Instead of going down to her studio, she stayed close to Daryl, and over those months, filled a journal with Zentangle drawings that she made as she sat side by side with her beloved, who had asked her to stay with him. The images on your bulletins this morning, are all drawings made by Lila as she sat by Daryl's side.

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And so this morning, dear ones, I invite you to hold these stories about prayer –

* the story of Jesus, praying; the One who we hold as the prime incarnation of our God, asking those who follow him to pray with him; not to him. Is that as revolutionary for you as it is for me?
* Mark's story of being shaped by ancient prayer traditions;
* Darrell's story of those who "stayed with him" during his arrest;
* Lila's visual story of staying with Daryl in his hours of need

How do you weave prayer into the hours of your day? When have you been companioned in our hour of need? Who might be asking you to stay with them? In these dark hours in which we live, what does staying awake with Christ look like?

In closing, I leave you with this prayer by Macrina Wiederkehr:

O Pilgrim of the Hours
Each morning
night's curtain
opens on a new day.
You are invited
to join the great opening.
Open your ears.
Open your heart.
Open your eyes
to the sacred path
you travel every day,
the path of the hours.

Greet the hours
with joyful awareness.
Greet the hours
with faithful presence.
Greet the hours
with a reverential bow.
Greet the hours
with a sacred pause.

Reverence each hour
as a small stepping stone
on your pilgrimage
through the day.
Receive the gift
of seven sacred pauses.
Practice waking up
seven times a day.

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