

# McCabe United Methodist Church

Talking with God Series Part 3:

## **“ChaosTown”**

Sermon on Matthew 14:13-27 & 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18 (May 27 & 28, 2017)

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Have you ever had one of those moments where the chaos of your immediate situation seems so overwhelming you can't even begin to imagine your next move? This happened to me, right here at McCabe, about three weeks ago. The circumstance wasn't tragic, or even all that stressful, but, in the moment, it felt chaotic enough to me that my mind was momentarily paralyzed.

A few weeks ago, on a Wednesday evening, I was the last one to leave the church building. Choir practice was long over, youth group was all done. I had my computer bag on my shoulder, purse in hand, and waltzed out the southeast door to walk to my vehicle that was parked in the far corner of our southeast parking lot.

As I walked toward my vehicle, I glanced to my right and noticed the light was on inside our McCabe shed. My first thought was, “Eh, no big deal,” and I kept walking. But, then I thought better of things and decided I should go back into the building, get the key to the shed, and turn the light off. For security and energy-saving purposes, there's no sense having a lit shed overnight.

So, I marched myself back into the building, got the shed key from its hiding spot in our locked offices, kept the shed key in my hand, dropped my computer bag and purse onto the little bench in the southeast entryway, and headed back *out* of the building and to the shed. I opened up the shed, turned the light off, locked and closed the shed door.

Then, as I pulled the shed door shut, the dilemma I'd created for myself became crystal-clear: the main church building was locked... and my stuff was inside. I quickly walked from the shed to the church doors and peered

in at my computer bag – and, more critically, I peered longingly at my *purse*, which contained my keys *and* my cell phone.

I was stuck outside the locked church building with neither any means to call for help *nor* with access to any phone numbers to call. (And who memorizes phone numbers these days?!)

Our house is only a mile from the church, but walking home wasn't going to do me all that much good because it, too, was locked and no one else was home who could have provided much help – both my husband and stepson were at work and wouldn't be home for at least another hour.

As the reality of my situation sunk-in, I was mentally paralyzed for what felt like hours, but was surely only a few seconds. In that moment, I recall looking around the parking lot and muttering in a somewhat prayer-like manner: “What do I do, what do I do, what do I do, what do I do?!”

You know, sometimes even when you're not intentionally praying – even when you're not intentionally talking with God – God talks back in a wonderfully helpful way. That evening three weeks ago, as I muttered, “What do I do, what do I do, what do I do, what do I do,” a voice I'm confident was the Holy Spirit whispered to me,

“Step one: breathe. You can figure this out.” So, I stopped and I took a long inhale, closed my eyes, and slowly exhaled. The Spirit had gotten me started with the first step, and the other steps fell into place quickly after that:

Find a neighbor who will let you borrow their phone. Call your husband. You have *his* number memorized. He's at work, but he'll be able to look up some numbers in the phone book. You'll eventually find someone with a key who will be able to come unlock and let you in.

Thank God for the alley neighbors who were outside and who, upon hearing my dilemma, didn't even wait for me to *ask* to offer the use of their phone. So, with the borrowed cell phone of a virtual stranger, I paced the parking lot as my husband searched a phone book at his workplace to find someone who, one, had a key to the church, and, two, had a landline number in the book!

After a couple of false starts, I got a hold of our wonderful Trustees committee chair and, at 9:30pm on a Wednesday night, he left his house, drove to the church, and unlocked the building for me.

As far as overwhelming, chaotic circumstances are concerned, this one was fairly small. Most of us – myself included – could probably think of many circumstances in our lives that were far more chaotic, far more life-altering, than locking oneself out of a building. That said, if God hadn't broken-in with a message to just breathe, I suspect I could have spiraled into a minor panic attack over locking myself out of the building!

In that situation, *prayer* made a distinct difference. And I'm so grateful.

Now, I am certainly no major expert when it comes to prayer, but I do know that prayer is a practice you *build*. Prayer is a practice *I'm* building in my own life. Years ago, it may not have occurred to me to stop for a moment of *prayer* after locking myself out of the church building... but, thank God, growth is always an option in this life! I've come a long way when it comes to prayer, but I'm not yet where I hope to be.

Our reading from First Thessalonians 5 instructs us to “pray without ceasing.” *Pray without ceasing*. Never stop praying.

If you're starting from scratch in your prayer life – if you know you have a long way to grow when it comes to prayer – that can seem a bit daunting, right? *Pray without ceasing*. Uff-da! That's a lot of praying if I never – or hardly ever – do it now!

Well, in his book *Talking with God*, Rev. Adam Weber helpfully refers to a monk in the 1600's named Brother Lawrence and *his* thoughts on “praying without ceasing.” Along these lines, Adam Weber writes this:

*“Rather than thinking of prayer as something separate and set apart from the rest [of] our day, just one more thing we need to cram into the week or add on top of our life, Brother Lawrence explained that prayer was meant to be done in the midst of it. In the midst of our day. In the midst of our week. In the midst of our life. Even in [ChaosTown]. We can pray.”*

Adam, then, goes on to say:

*“Are you washing dishes? Brother Lawrence would tell us to acknowledge and talk with God while washing dishes. Are you running errands? Talk with God while running errands. Is your day slammed with meetings? Are you running from one thing to the next? Are you painting yet another room in your house?*

*“Cleaning up [mess] from your kid, your dog, or both at the same time? Feel like you're the actual mayor of [ChaosTown]? Pray without ceasing. Continually. Always. Never stop. Talk with God in the midst of it all.”<sup>1</sup>*

Sounds simple, right? But, of course, things that sound simple aren't always as simple in *practice* as we wish they were. So, we learn and grow. We find ourselves a teacher. And, those of us who call ourselves “Christian,” have Jesus himself as a prayer teacher *par excellence*.

Consider today's reading from Matthew 14: in the midst of some extremely chaotic happenings, Jesus managed to separate himself from the crowds and from his closest disciples *twice*... simply because he knew he needed to do it in order to talk with God.

Just prior to the start of today's reading from Matthew 14, Jesus had learned about the death of John the Baptist, his relative and ministry companion. Surely, he was personally devastated by this. So, Jesus withdrew from others so he could be alone – likely to spend time talking with God in grief-stained prayer. But the crowds found him. As the reading states, Jesus “*had compassion for them and cured their sick.*”

Then, because the crowd stuck around – who wouldn't stick around a guy who has the ability to offer miraculous healing?! – Jesus *also* miraculously *fed* them all... even though there were thousands of people in the crowd and they had very little food to start with.

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<sup>1</sup> Weber, Adam. *Talking with God*. 58-59.

But Jesus had started the day engulfed in grief over the death of John the Baptist. And, while we understand Jesus to have been fully *God*, we know him to have also been fully *human*: when Jesus grieved, he experienced that grief in the same we each of us experiences grief... when there was legitimate chaos in his life, he experienced it to be just as chaotic as we experience *our* chaos to be.

So, he needed to talk with God in the midst of it all; after hearing the news of John the Baptist's death, he spent time alone talking with God.

Then, after the crowds found him, and after he healed and fed the crowds, Jesus sent his disciples across the sea in a boat so he could *again* go off by himself to spend time in prayer. But, when evening came, heavy winds began battering the boat with rough waves and the disciples became fearful. So, Jesus left his time with God to be with his friends: he calmed their fears and he calmed the wind.

Even Jesus himself needed to make time to be alone talking with God.

Now... you or I may find it next to impossible to fully separate ourselves from others for times of extended prayer, like Jesus was able to do at times... but I'm rather confident Jesus talked with God, here and there, in the midst of daily life as well. And, as Adam Weber and Brother Lawrence indicated, I'm pretty sure that's what it means to "pray without ceasing."

This idea that "praying without ceasing" simply means praying *in the midst of it all*... in the midst of *all* of life... this idea is so compelling to me. And it strikes me as being *true*. About this, Adam Weber also writes:

*"Instead of it being another daily chore, something changes when prayer slowly becomes as natural as breathing. When we figure out that it no longer takes energy. Instead, prayer fills us with it. Prayer fills us with life. It gives us the ability to love our coworker and not strangle him. It allows us to be patient instead of frustrated with our kids, or someone else's. Prayer makes it possible to have a positive attitude on the [crummiest] of days."*

And then he closes this statement with words I just love... he says,

*“I’m beginning to realize that unless I am in constant conversation with God, I have little love, little patience, little gratitude, and a terrible attitude on my own.”<sup>2</sup>*

Isn't that powerful? I'm going to read that last statement again: “I'm beginning to realize that unless I am in constant conversation with God, I have little love, little patience, little gratitude, and a terrible attitude on my own.”

“Constant conversation” with God – relationship with God – is so important if we want a peace-filled, joy-filled life on this earth. And for that relationship to happen, *prayer* is as important as breathing.

Several days ago, one of our McCabe moms told Pastor Mark and me that one of her kiddos had truly internalized Pastor Mark's children's message last weekend. In his children's message last weekend, he helped the kids think about prayer as “just talking to God” about whatever's on your mind – wherever you are.

Well, that night, this mom and one of her little ones were starting their bedtime prayer routine and the little one said something like,

“Pastor Mark said prayer is just talking to God. So, I can talk to God no matter where I am – even if I'm on the playground at school!” And that's exactly it. Incredibly simple – yet incredibly difficult for us to actually accomplish sometimes.

So. On the playground. At the grocery store. In a meeting. While vacuuming the carpet, emptying the dishwasher, or taking out the trash. In the moment after you realize you've locked yourself out of your place of employment and no one is around to help you out.

We can talk with God amid all the mundane, normal things of life. And I *promise you* this: if we regularly talk with God amid the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 61.

mundane, normal things of life, it will be our first instinct when we find ourselves in ChaosTown.

And when prayer – when talking with God – is our first instinct amid chaos, even the worst of the worst circumstances will seem more manageable.

Because, when we regularly talk with God, we become assured of the amazing good news that God *is* truly with us amid it all – that God is truly with us, and that God is working for good, bringing peace and joy. No matter what.

Friends, we worship a God who can't wait to talk with us...because talking fosters deeper, stronger relationships. And that's what God wants with each of us: a deep and abiding relationship that brings us peace, joy, and life abundant. So, as a way of growing in that holy relationship, let's spend a couple of minutes, right here and now, talking with God.

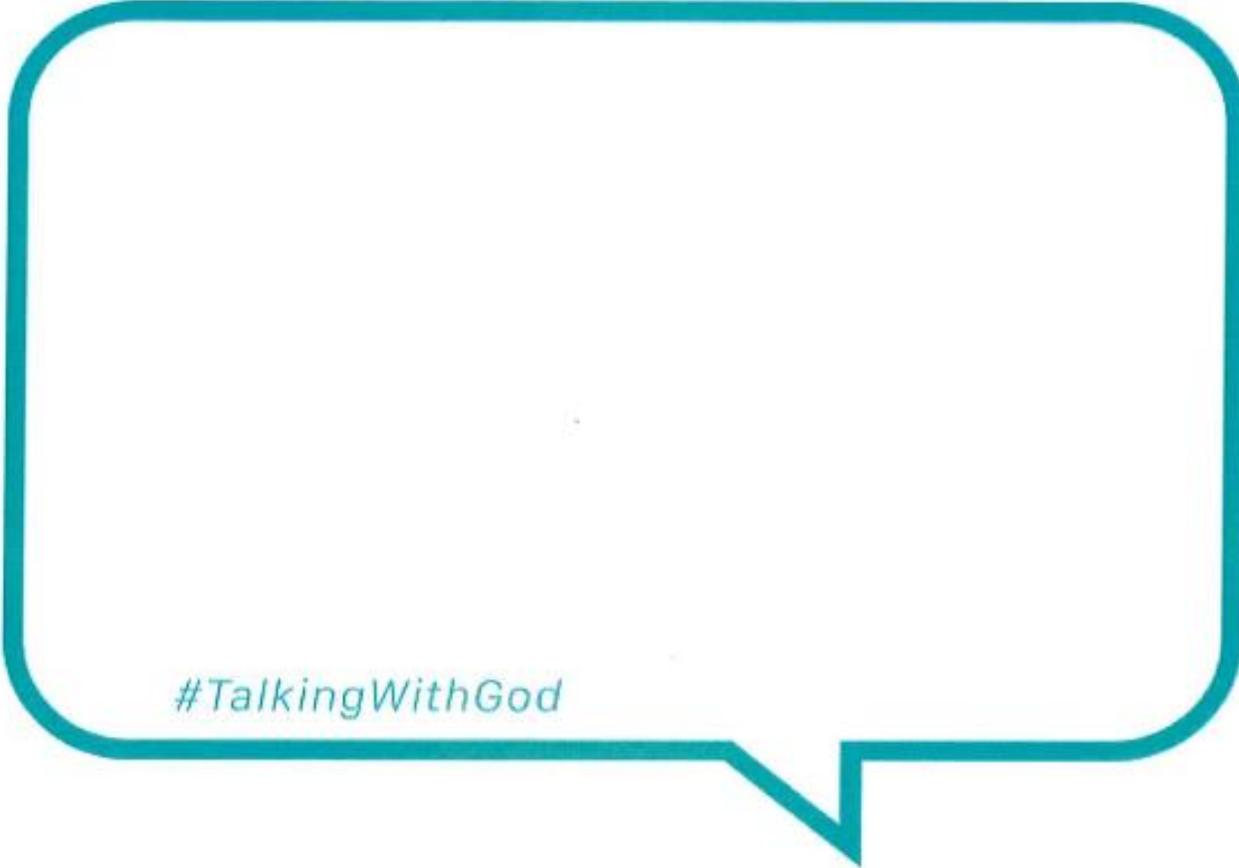
If you'd like to utilize the sheet with the blue-green prayer bubble that's in your bulletins *[or at the end of this printed sermon or on the website]*<sup>3</sup>, please do so. There are ideas and prayer starters on the bottom half of those sheets, if that's helpful for you.

In this time of prayer, you can talk with God in writing using one of those prayer bubbles... or you can simply talk with God in the quiet of your seat in the room. Whatever you say to God doesn't need to be complex or profound – it just needs to be what's on your mind and heart.

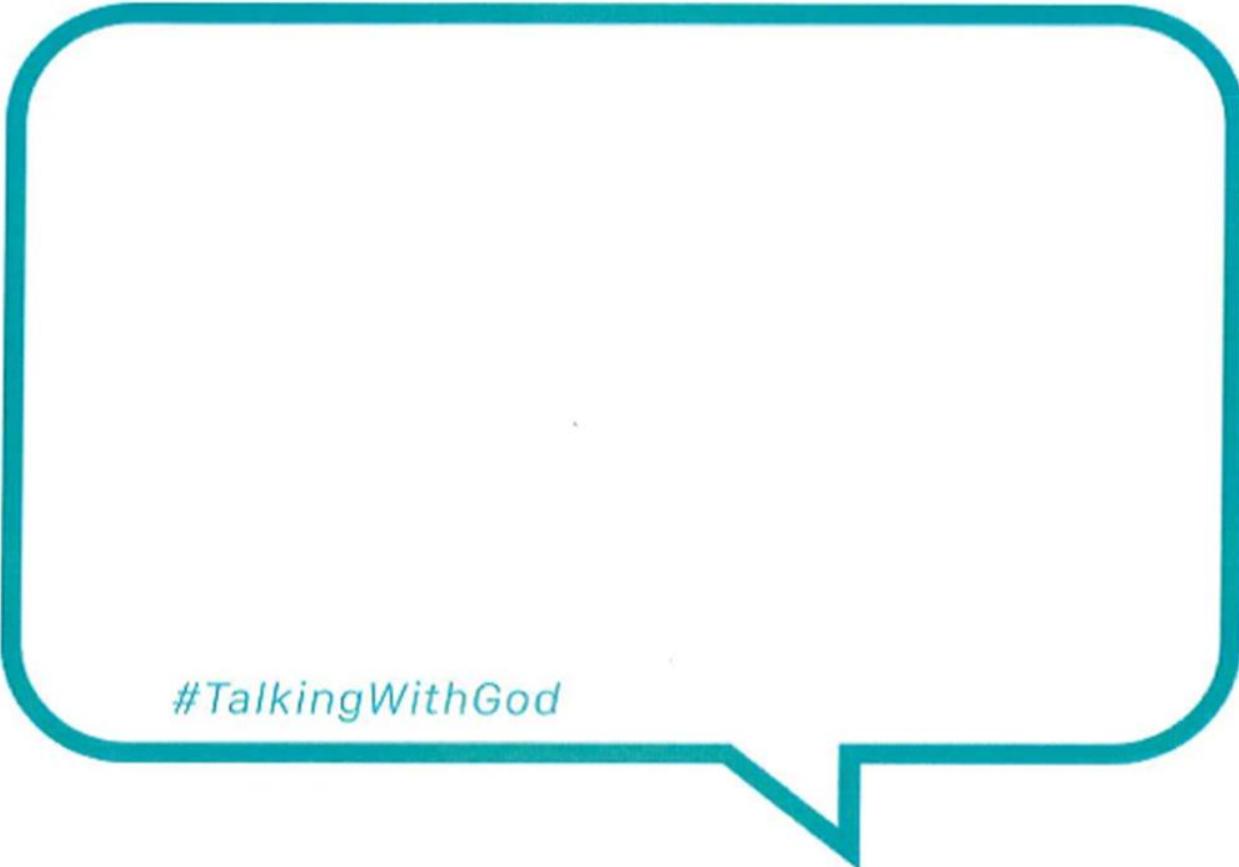
God Almighty... heavenly parent... ever-present Holy Spirit... thank you for loving us from before we were even born. Thank you for inviting us into a relationship with you. May we know now and always that you love us and want a relationship with us. Like a friend, may we know we can always talk with you – in chaos, in calm, amid it all, we can talk with you. Thank you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> More **#Talking with God bubbles** can be found on the McCabe website (<http://www.mccabeumc.com>) on the Messages page, Under the “Talking to God” Section)



*#TalkingWithGod*



*#TalkingWithGod*