

February 8, 2015 – Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Job 7:1-4, 6-7; Psalms 147:1-2, 3-4, 5-6; 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23; Mark 1:29-39

As I reflect on the readings especially of today, I was struck that throughout the Gospel Jesus has been portrayed as a man grounded in prayer. His life is described as one spent in communion with God despite the many demands and pressures of life, attending to many people afflicted with all kinds of troubles.

As I reflect more deeply on the readings, the images of our students come in mind. Once a week, another sister and I team teach a religion class at a government secondary school for girls, which was founded by and formerly run by the Maryknoll sisters. Built in the 1950s, it is also one of the first secondary schools in Tanzania. There are 130 to 140 students, a mixture of girls who come from different parts of the country. With such a large number, class is held in the Catholic church built on the school grounds, which has become a wonderful space for our students to learn not only their lessons but matters of faith. We design the curriculum and integrate scripture-grounded issues of justice, peace and integrity of creation into the classes.

As I come to know our students, I feel how burdened they are with the demands and hardships of their studies, family concerns, different kinds of illnesses, relationships, and by what the future holds for them. We introduce different forms of prayer to expand their experience of prayer, and we encourage and challenge them to follow the example of Jesus – to withdraw from the busyness and demands of life just to spend time alone with God in solitude. As time goes by, I notice how our students value time and space for prayer – especially silence. They make extra effort on Saturday nights and other moments to pray together as a community.

In one of our lessons, I made a Power Point presentation of people from different parts of the world carrying different kinds of burdens and afflictions. These afflictions were all brought to Jesus. After that we invited the students to be silent for a while, and later asked them to write what they would like to unload and bring to God. The church was filled with silence as they enter into communion with God, and I felt the process allowed them to freely bring their troubles to Jesus. As the Gospel reading portrays, many people were brought to Jesus for they recognized him as being able to attend and heal their afflictions. Our students also find comfort in knowing that in our world many people other than them are suffering and are also in need of healing and prayers.

In their notes and in sharing with the rest of their classmates, the students said that prayer plays a positive role; it is the strength of their lives. In today's reading, prayer is the way that Jesus finds continuous strength to fulfill his ministry. Indeed, there is great peace and comfort in spending time alone with God and this gives a person the strength to respond in a world with so many needs.

As the scripture today paints a clear image of the healing ministry of Jesus nourished by his constant intimacy with God, so too our students, through their prayers and little acts of kindness, found new ways of serving each other and our world afflicted with so many troubles. Truly, Jesus continually extends a healing touch to people in our schools, homes, and places of work, and I have been greatly encouraged by the variety and depth of healing that God has brought about in the lives of the young women with whom we journey. I continually pray that our students carry the value of prayer and silence with them wherever they may journey in the future. May they continue to find solace in Jesus who has come to bring good news as the psalm of today clearly says: God "heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds ... The Lord lifts up the downtrodden."