

## **“Conversation Partner”**

A Sermon Based on Luke 9:18-24

First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

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Cupid, of course, is the symbol of Valentine's Day. He's also a pretty capricious little god according to Greek and Roman mythology and he loves to play a good joke. So since it's Valentine's Day, I thought I'd start off by telling you a Cupid kind of story.

Recently a middle-aged woman was sitting in a waiting room. She was there for her first appointment with her new dentist. A friend had recommended to him. "Dr. Dodd is terrific," her friend had told her. So the woman made the appointment for a first visit.

It was February, a few days before the 14th, and as the woman sat in the waiting room she noticed with pleasure the fresh red flowers in a vase on a table and the red hearts that decorated the wall behind it. Then she noticed a diploma. It was a DDS diploma and like all diplomas this one displayed Dr. Dodd's full name, David Charles Dodd.

As she read the name she suddenly remembered that a tall, handsome, dark-haired boy with that same full name had been in her high school home-room class years ago. "Could this be the same guy I had a crush on way back then?" she wondered. And she felt just a little bit of excitement.

It quickly faded though as her new dentist entered the room. He had deep lines in his face and was going bald. The woman smiled at herself. "He's way too old to have been in school with me," she thought. Still, after he examined her teeth, she asked him, "Did you happen to go to Morgan High School?"

"Yes! I'm a Morgan Marauder," he said with pride.

"When did you graduate?" she asked.

"1979," he replied. "Why do you ask?"

"You were in my class!" she said excitedly.

"Really?" he said, looking at her carefully. "What did you teach?"

"Love" writes Paul "isn't rude." And that's a good thing to remember, especially around Valentine's Day, especially with people you might know!

Maybe that's why when we read the Gospel this morning we ought to take another look at Luke 9:18. For in the first half of the verse it says "Once when Jesus was praying in private, his disciples were with him." Now if you don't just read past those words, if you stop and think about them for a minute, they look rude, don't they?

I mean here's Jesus. And he's obviously sought out a private moment in his very public life, a private moment and a private place to pray some private prayers. But his disciples Luke says were with him. Actually, if you go behind the English words to the Greek ones Luke wrote you'll discover they are a little more descriptive. For the verb Luke uses paints a picture of a group of disciples gathering themselves gradually around Jesus to eavesdrop on his prayers.

So I ask you. Can you ever imagine yourself doing that? Can you ever imagine yourself being rude enough and bold enough to sneak up on someone who is praying and stand there in order to listen to them? Well maybe you can't, but I can.

You see when I was in seminary, Walter Kaiser was a Professor of Old Testament at Trinity where I went to school. And Dr. Kaiser had a custom that everyone knew. He would always begin his class with a prayer. But it wasn't just any prayer. It was a prayer that drew an audience.

In fact, sometimes students who weren't in the class would find out when Dr. Kaiser was teaching. They would look up the location of his class. And if they weren't in class themselves, they would go and gather at the door of Dr. Kaiser's class simply in order to listen to his prayers. I remember hearing one of them explain to me why they went. "No-one" this person said to me, "no-one prays like Dr. Kaiser. He talks to God like he's talking to someone he knows."

And I think it must have been that same kind of sixth sense about Jesus and the way he prayed that drew an audience around him too. For like Luke says, "One day, Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him." They were with him Luke says. And there was really only one reason for them to be with him then. They must have wanted to hear him. Somehow when Jesus prayed it must have seemed to them as though Jesus was talking to God like he was talking to someone he knew.

And the really interesting thing about noticing the motive the disciples had for being with Jesus is the meaning it adds to the dialogue that happens next. For Jesus seems to have sensed that he was not alone. Probably it wasn't the first time his disciples had gathered around him to be with him and listen to him while he was praying. So he finished his prayer and without pausing he looked up and asked his disciples, "Who do the crowds say that I am?"

And Luke says, "they replied" but he doesn't mean in unison. He means that the answers were spoken by some of them and all of them agreed. And the answers sound a little strange to us; John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. But the answers probably didn't sound strange to the crowds because the crowds had reached their conclusions based on what they'd seen Jesus do. After all he called people to repent like John. He gave them food like Elijah. He preached like one of the prophets.

The crowds identified Jesus on the basis of what they had seen him do and what they had heard him preach. But there was one thing they hadn't seen. There was one more crucial part of Jesus life and ministry that they hadn't experienced. For the crowds had never been with him in private. They had never had the privilege of gathering around him like his disciples had done to listen to him pray.

So Jesus changes his tack. He asks his disciples, who had seen more and heard more than the crowds, "But you, what about you? Who do you say that I am?" And Peter spoke up first. I believe you're "God's Messiah," he said.

You see I think Luke is doing all he can do as a writer to try and draw our attention to something. He is trying to show us that Peter's confession doesn't come out of nowhere. It comes out of Peter's experience and part of Peter's experience was listening to Jesus pray. Peter had been there. He had listened to Jesus pray. He had listened to the way he talked. He knew that when Jesus talked to God, it sounded like he really knew Him.

He listened to the names Jesus used to call on God. He listened to what Jesus said to Him. He listened to the way Jesus praised God and prayed for His kingdom to come, for God's will to be done before praying for himself or any of his needs. Peter had listened to way Jesus prayed, not once or twice , but time after time by this time. And his experience had convinced. He had never heard any man pray like this man. And the way Jesus prayed convinced Peter. This man, Jesus was more than a man. He was God's Messiah.

So what can we see in this story that can translate into our story? Two things I think. First we can see what Peter did and we can learn to do it. We can learn to listen to Jesus prayers just as he did. And actually, we're going to do that beginning next week because for the seven Sundays of Lent and Easter we're going to listen to the Lord's prayer this year.

We're going to take time not only to say the prayer together as we do each week. We're going to take time to listen to it, to slow down and think it through, to reflect on it and try and realize what the words of the prayer really mean. Because when we understand what the words of the Lord's prayer mean, then the prayer can start to change us.

And the Lord's prayer was meant to change us. It was meant to be more than a prayer that we simply memorize and repeat. It was meant to transform us. It was meant to help us grow and mature in our relationship with God. And the prayer can help us do that if we take time, as Peter did, to listen to it; to listen to what Jesus is really saying as he prays the prayer and teaches us to pray it too. So that's the first thing we can take away from the story in Luke today. We can take away a deep desire to listen to Jesus pray, a willingness to let his prayer reshape us and deepen our conversation with God.

And the second thing we can take away from Luke's story of how Jesus prayer inspired Peter's confession is this. We can learn how to use the prayers, not only of Jesus, but of others in our own spiritual growth.

Do you own a book of prayers? Have you ever gone looking for one? Have you ever gone looking for prayers that your spiritual heroes whoever they are, have prayed? Have you ever read one of John Calvin's prayers, or Martin Luther's prayers? Have you ever read a prayer that comes from Mother Theresa or Max Lucado? If you haven't, you've missed an opportunity; an opportunity to listen as others who know God better than we do talk to Him.

And as they talk to Him, if you listen, you can be drawn into their conversation with God. You can begin to picture God and think about Him the way the prayer you're reading thinks of Him and pictures Him. Owning and reading through a book of prayers can truly transform our conversation with God.

So starting next week, each day during Lent I'm going to be inviting you to join me in a Lenten experiment. Instead of giving up something for Lent this year, I'm

going to be asking you to add something to your already busy lives. I'm going to be inviting you to take time each day over the next seven weeks to pray the Lord's prayer, to pray it slowly and carefully and listen to the words that you're praying.

And I'm going to be inviting you to read a prayer each day that comes from someone else, someone whose prayer I think has the power, like Jesus prayer, to help us change and grow as a result of reading it and reflecting on it. I'm going to be including an insert in the bulletin each week with seven prayers on it that all of us can use to do this. And you'll find the first insert in your bulletin next week.

As we continue to move through a year called "Conversation" trying to learn how to pray and abide in Christ, I think this Lent is going to be a very special time for all of us.

Let's pray ...