

Building a Life of Prayer Julie Cicak April 19, 2009

What's so difficult about building a life of prayer? I would like to reflect on this question together this morning. By way of beginning, I would like to share my prayer journey with you as I experienced it during Lent. At the beginning of Lent, I decided to give up thirty minutes of personal time in order to add thirty minutes of prayer time each day. I had high expectations that I would willingly be able to give up just thirty minutes, but of course, actual practice proved otherwise. As I evaluate my experience, I find that there is good news and bad news, (which would you like to hear first?). Okay, the good news is that even though I did not achieve thirty minutes of prayer every single day, I did develop a hunger for prayer time. On the days that I was able to pray, my heart and my very soul felt fed and a peace surrounded me as I raced through my usual hectic schedule. And what was the bad news? I discovered that when I didn't pray, it was because I avoided prayer. In other words, the problem wasn't my busy schedule; the problem was me!

What are the blocks which we must surmount in order to make prayer a consistent part of our day? First, we allow our attention to be diverted by distractions. During my Lenten prayer experience, one day, instead of praying, I found myself in front of the TV watching reruns of the Beverly Hillbillies! Talk about distracted by something worthless!

Second, we allow a cloud of anxiety and doubt to block our access to God. We find it difficult to pray when our minds are asking questions like, "Does God really hear this prayer?, Will God answer my prayer?, Am I even worthy to enter God's presence in prayer?". When we accept our doubts and our questions as a necessary part of our spiritual journey, we free ourselves to pray. In *Letters to a Young Poet* Rainer Maria Rilke says this:

I want to beg you to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

The third stumbling block to a thriving prayer life is that we may be asking, where, and in what position, do I pray? The answer is, of course, everywhere and in any position. We can place in the trash can our view that we must always pray kneeling with our hands folded. Prayer can happen in our car while waiting at a stop light and in the shower as we prepare for a busy day. Meaningful prayer can happen at the counter preparing dinner and in the yard while working in the garden. For instance, I pray for my children at the preschool during naptime. I don't even use words! I envision Jesus walking around my room. In my heart I see him kneel at each tiny cot and watch as he hugs the child sleeping there. At the end of my prayer Jesus takes my hand and we simply sit together in my room, as I pray for guidance as a teacher.

Fourth, we may struggle with the question, "What do I pray about?". I think the answer is simply that we open our life to God; we open to him our joys, concerns, burdens and sufferings, and sitting in his presence, we share all that we are and do. We place into his hands our friends and loved ones, our troubled world and our world leaders, and our

needs as a human family. We can turn to Jesus, our guide and our teacher, to help us learn how and for what to pray. In his work *Quiet Talks on Prayer* S. D. Gordon writes: *How much prayer meant to Jesus! It was not only His regular habit, but His resort in every emergency, however slight or serious. When perplexed He prayed. When hard pressed by work He prayed. When hungry for fellowship He found it in prayer. He chose His associates and received His messages upon His knees. If tempted, He prayed. If criticized, He prayed. If fatigued in body or wearied in spirit, He had recourse to His one unailing habit of prayer. Prayer brought Him unmeasured power at the beginning, and kept the flow unbroken and undiminished. There was no emergency, no difficulty, no necessity, no temptation that would not yield to prayer, as He practiced it. Shall not we, who have been tracing these steps in His prayer-life, go back over them again and again until we breathe in His very spirit of prayer? And shall we not, too, ask Him daily to teach us how to pray, and then plan to get alone with Him regularly that He may have opportunity to teach us, and we the opportunity to practice His teaching?*

And how about anger? Aren't there times when we feel really, really mad at God because we feel that God is not answering our prayers, or perhaps, our prayers are not being answered in the way that we feel they should be. After all, God is neither a giant Santa Claus in the sky handing out treat bags, nor is God a life insurance salesman selling eternal policies, and so sometimes, we don't always get what we want. When it doesn't seem like our prayers are making any difference in the world, it is easy for us to feel despondent and to give up on having a prayer life.

During my Lenten devotions, I made a discovery about what prayer is, and this discovery helped me to overcome these five stumbling blocks. I discovered that in prayer, we must allow ourselves to be transparent, open and receiving. Letting go of those things which separate us from God, we allow God to enter into our life experience and to lead us in new directions just as Jesus did.

Also, I was reminded that we can pray *everywhere*, and we can also pray in a variety of ways. Do you have a favorite hymn? Singing that hymn to yourself during the day can become your offering of prayer. Worship on Sunday with our church family through music, sacrament, tithe, sermon and liturgy can become an act of prayer through focused listening and participation. Moving out of your comfort zone and participating in a mission trip is an act of prayer. Reading scripture and then allowing the words to penetrate into your heart rather than just analyzing them with your mind can be a doorway into contemplative prayer. Perhaps, as you journey through your day you might find yourself repeating the Jesus prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner*, or some other meaningful phrase like, "Help me show love to those around me beloved God", or simply "thank you God for today". Melanie told me that when she is praying for others, she simply lifts them into the Lord's presence while visualizing the person in her heart. If you like to dance, you can create a prayer of movement, using your body to formulate a prayer. Did something really funny happen to you today? Why not share the story with God? Laughing with God is a wonderful way to pray. In fact, ways to pray are as many and as varied as each of us. Trying new methods and being willing to create and to experiment breathes new life into our prayer journey.

Since prayer is a conversation, there are times when we simply need to shut up and listen. Have you experienced times of spiritual emptiness, when you may have felt that God was a bazillion light years away. I certainly have, and after reflection, have come to realize that those periods often occurred when I was so busy talking that God could not get

a word in edge-wise. I have become involved with the Contemplative Center in Denver, a ministry through the Catholic Archdiocese and headed by Father Thomas Keating, a Trappist Monk. Prayer at the center involves periods of silence. In fact, a small plaque placed next to the door at the entrance to the chapel reads, "The first language of God is silence".

The fourth realization about prayer that I had during Lent is that prayer is nourishment, as essential to our existence as sleep, food and companionship. God is the creator of all things, the giver of life, the very breath of our being. Through Jesus Christ and through the Comforter – the Holy Spirit – who comes alongside and walks with us, God surrounds us with unconditional love and compassion, helping us to find meaning and wholeness in our broken world. As we are nourished, we are able to face sadness, grief, discouragement and suffering with creative action, dignity and peace. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians:

Be joyful always; pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

I don't think that Paul was some weird Pollyanna person, unable to recognize suffering; after all, he was repeatedly beaten, imprisoned, and eventually martyred. Rather, I think Paul was helping us to understand that while God may not be fixing our situation, God is meeting our needs with his abiding presence and that through this presence we can experience joy.

If joy can be found through a life nourished by prayer, what other blessings can we name? Over three hundred years ago, Brother Lawrence, a lay Brother in a large Carmelite monastery, shared thoughts about his prayer life now collected in a small book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. The monastery is long gone and forgotten, but the reflections of Brother Lawrence remain. While cooking in the kitchen, his lowly occupation, Brother Lawrence discovered that by focusing upon God with a grateful heart, he could be continually in the Lord's presence. This simple way of praying allowed Brother Lawrence to experience the blessings of assured faith and strengthened hope. He wrote:

By practicing God's presence and continuously looking at Him, the soul familiarizes itself with Him to the extent that it passes almost its whole life in continual acts of love, praise, confidence, thanksgiving, offering and petition. Sometimes all this may merge into one single act that does not end, because the soul is always in the ceaseless exercise of God's Divine Presence.

This quote sums up the many blessings that a prayer life can bring when we overcome our stumbling blocks to prayer: through an open and active prayer life, we live a life continuously in communion with God.

Is this not what we seek, we who are called to be the Easter people? With our intellect, we have discussed five stumbling blocks to a living prayer life and four discoveries about prayer which counteract these stumbling blocks. We have celebrated the blessings of a genuine prayer life but now we arrive at the crux of prayer. We, the people of Easter, live and die by prayer. Again, Brother Lawrence provides us with insight:

Do not forget [God]! Think of Him often; adore Him ceaselessly; live and die with Him. That is the real business of a Christian; in a word, it is our profession. If we do not know it, we must learn it.

Prayer is our opportunity to be with God, to live a life sustained in His purpose and to make that purpose real in our world. By acknowledging that we must pray to survive we each

acknowledge that our life is forfeit to God and that our being is bound up in God. Ultimately, prayer is not just a tool or just a nice accessory to our lives; rather, it is our identity in Christ. As we die to self through prayer, in order to live in Christ, we are empowered to take on the burden of suffering others experience in our world. We become the hands and feet of Christ carrying the Easter Message of hope and healing. The ministry of Christ is our ministry and through our prayers, living and active, the Kingdom of God will surely come.

Please remain seated and sing a prayer with me, *Lord Listen to your Children praying. The words will appear on the screen.*

As we enter this time of prayer, I invite you to pray with me in a new way. Together, we are creating a space, where, praying from the heart, we will let go of the past and the future and center here in the moment with God.

First, we will pray for our sisters and brothers listed in the bulletin. As I read their names, I invite you, while in an attitude of prayer, to picture the person for whom we pray; picture yourself taking their hand and leading them into God's light. **(Hazel Zumwalt, Shirley Lovejoy, Rev. Jean Steiner, Hank Hettinger, Kathy Campe and members of her family.) Beloved God, thank you for your loving care of our church family. Amen** Now, as I read Philippians Chapter 3 verses 4 through 7, I invite you to envision yourself sitting with the believers at Philippi, listening as the Apostle Paul's letter is being read for the first time. I will read the passage through twice allowing time for silent contemplation after each reading. With your eyes closed, allow the words to speak within your heart and if a particular phrase catches your attention, allow yourself to repeat that phrase quietly to yourself. I will read the passage again a third time and after this reading we will complete our prayer time and then pray the Lord's Prayer together in unison.

Let us be in an attitude of Prayer:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God; which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
(X2 with period of silence between)

(After 3rd reading)

Beloved God, we are so grateful that you are here, present with us, surrounding us with your love. Teach us to pray, that we may live in your presence and thus be empowered to share the good news of the life, death and resurrection of our savior Jesus with each other, our family, our neighbors and our world. We pray together, as Jesus taught us saying:

Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name,

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil,

For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever, Amen.