

Readings

Gen 15:5-12,17-18

Ps 27:1, 7-8,8-9,13-14

Phil 3:17 - 4:1

Luke 9:28-36

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Transforming Prayer

A man once was praying to God. “God!” he called out. God responded, “Yes, my son?” And the man said, “Can I ask you a question?” “Of course, go right ahead,” God replied. “God, what are a million years to you?” God answered, “A million years to me are like a second.” “Hmm,” the man wondered. Then he asked, “God, what are a million dollars worth to you?” God said, “A million dollars to me is as a penny.” So, the man thought quickly and asked, “God, can I have a penny?” And God cheerfully replied, “Sure!...Just a second.”

This funny little anecdote reminds us of a key point – that prayer, at its heart, is communication, conversation with God. As St. John Paul II said, “Prayer develops that conversation with Christ which makes us his intimate friends.” And we certainly know that Jesus the Christ recognized the importance of prayer; he encourages us to pray, just as he did his first disciples. Notice that, in our Gospel, Luke begins by pointing out that “Jesus took Peter, John, and James and went up the mountain to pray,” and it was “while Jesus was praying” that he was transfigured, transformed.

So too, especially during this season of Lent, we hope that prayer will renew us and transform us, drawing us closer to God and one another, as we journey toward Easter. Along with

fasting and almsgiving, prayer is one of the pillar practices of Lent, but perhaps one we take for granted, or we don't even give much thought. It can become rote, routine, right? So, why not spend a few minutes refreshing ourselves on prayer?

I thought it would be useful to draw on some of the things I hear rather frequently in my pastoral ministry. Here's one: "Fr. Joe, I'm just not praying as I'd like or as I should." It's then that I remind the person of something St. Thérèse of Lisieux once wrote: "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy." Like Abram in today's 1st Reading, it can be as simple as looking up at the night sky at the stars and appreciating what we've been given; stopping in our day and saying, "Thank you!" or "God, please help me." Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus tells us that prayer doesn't require "many words."

It's also good to remember that God doesn't need prayer. We do. That's not to say that God doesn't want to hear from us, that Christ doesn't want an intimate relationship with each one of us, but praying is to our benefit, opening us up to God and to God present in our sisters and brothers. As a result, prayer helps us not to become self-righteous, self-centered, or stingy, preoccupied "with earthly things," as St. Paul puts it in his Letter to the Philippians in our 2nd Reading. Through praying, we create the fertile ground in our hearts, from which forgiveness and generosity spring forth. Seen in that light alone, it's essential, isn't it?

Nevertheless, some still contend, some have told me, "I don't have the time to pray. I'm just so busy." Again, we are probably praying, conversing with God more than we realize. Yet, carving out time specifically for God in our day does make a difference. Look how often Jesus and the disciples took a break in their incredibly full schedule, as in today's Transfiguration

story. And as St. Francis de Sales remarked, “Every one of us needs half an hour for prayer each day, except when we are busy; then we need an hour.” Ironically, it is when we’re stressed or bogged down that we most need to lift up our hearts and minds to be filled with what really matters, Christ’s grace and strength.

Moreover, perseverance in prayer often helps us see alternatives that we never had considered. It can open our eyes, widen our vision, when we’re tempted to think, in another comment I hear, “God hasn’t answered me.” The results of prayer don’t always appear straightforward, do they? For example, the miracle for a terminally ill loved one may not be a physical cure, but a healing that prepares him or her for going forth into God’s eternal embrace. Our conversation with God also needs to be a two-way street. Keep listening, for as St. Mother Teresa advises, “In the silence of the heart God speaks. If you face God in prayer and silence, God will speak to you.” As the Divine voice in our Gospel declares, “This is my chosen Son; listen to him.” Listen to Jesus.

Finally, consider that you and I might be an answer to a prayer. By reaching out, by lending an ear or a hand, by volunteering, Christ works with us, and through us, transforming us and those we assist. Our prayer calls us back into action; like much of life, it requires a balance between contemplation and good works. In the passage immediately following today’s Gospel, Jesus, Peter, John, and James come back down the mountain, refueled for more ministry. As we continue our Lenten journey then, let’s heed the words of our own St. Augustine spoke to Peter and to us. In one of his sermons on the Transfiguration, Augustine says, “Come down, Peter. You were eager to go resting on the mountain; come down, *preach the word, press on....* Toil away.” (*Sermon 78, 2.3-6*) May we press on to Easter, renewed and transformed by our prayer!