

May 24, 2020

This is the last Sunday of Easter. Our scripture lesson for today signals a change. Jesus finishes his last-minute instructions with a prayer-- it's a part of what is called the high priestly prayer. And this is a prayer not only for Jesus himself, but for the disciples as well. A prayer that they be protected and continue in a new kind of unity. Much of the language in this prayer is very mysterious.

I read many commentaries on this prayer, and truthfully, just as soon as you think you have a handle on it, you discover there are even richer ways to understand it. Perhaps that's the beauty of this prayer...

Today, I'd like to do some reflecting on prayer itself. And let's also spend some time imagining what those disciples were thinking and praying about, after Jesus left them. To some degree or other, we can all identify with these disciples. We all live with confusing things happening around us, especially these days, and we wonder, how is this all going to end? It's been a part of my prayers; I imagine yours as well.

Prayer is many things, and there are probably as many ways to pray as there are people. God is present with all of us in different and unique ways.

Quick story... When I was young, we were taught to pray... Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, God bless... then I would name everyone in my family, my grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, friends... eventually my mind would start wandering...

Sometimes I would remember, oh yeah, I was praying, I better end, so I would say amen, and that was that. I sometimes wondered what God thought of my praying. At an early age I decided that if God knew everything I was thinking; I didn't always have to end my prayers by saying amen. I trusted that God knew what was in my heart.

As I grew older, and for many, many years, I didn't pray at all; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say I didn't send any thoughts in God's direction. It wasn't necessarily intentional; I just didn't know God anymore...

I spent many years without praying, or even thinking about prayer. But it all started to change when I was raising sheep... Late one night in the barn, I remember a poignant moment immediately after the delivery of a lamb; the umbilical cord hadn't severed. So, I swiped the lamb's nostrils and severed the umbilical cord myself. And the lamb literally gasped for air, and in that moment, I was reminded of the biblical phrase that God had breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.

Without even realizing what I was doing, I found myself sending thoughts of awe, and gratitude in God's direction. And, it kind of startled me; I realized I was praying. I think we've all had those kinds of moments; when we've been overtaken by a sense of wonder, and we just need to express ourselves. And it feels like it is the most natural thing in the world to do.

I've also had these kinds of moments when I've been up in a tree stand, hunting... Sometimes you see the most amazing things... Or watching a sunset... Or watching humming birds, zooming around... I trust you know what I'm talking about...

Shortly after that experience, I remember lying awake one night, reflecting on that particular birth experience, and I found myself thinking about God. I wondered if there really was a God who received my prayer. And I found myself opening, giving myself permission to think about it. And I specifically found myself asking, "God, is that you? Are you here with me?" Not really expecting any answer...

At first it was startling for me to think of myself as saying a prayer. It wasn't part of my identity. But slowly, I found myself spending more and more time thinking and reflecting with it. I wasn't making any conclusions, but I did become more and more open to the idea of prayer. I found myself asking, "God, if that is you, teach me how to pray." I remember saying little prayers as I was driving, or going to sleep...

When I did pray, I noticed how the act of prayer shifted my attention. I thought, I might be able to fool others about myself, I might even be able to fool myself about myself, but I'm pretty certain I can't fool God about myself; so, when I prayed I found myself being painfully truthful.

And, I found myself asking some deeper questions, “What is worthy of praying for, what is it that God would want me to pray about?” Should I pray to win the lottery? Should I pray for an easy life? And I found myself asking, “What does God think of me and my prayer?”

In a very real way, I found myself in a transformative process that I never imagined. For me the path into prayer was a path into self-discovery. Prayer became a mirror that reflected my core values; it allowed me to see things about myself that were sometimes disturbing. I really was that shallow...

And consequently, change happened. And it had to do with internal perspective, how I saw things. Instead of praying to win the lottery, I found myself asking God, to teach me how to be more generous. Instead of praying for an easy life, I started praying that God would give me strength to do the hard things I needed to do... Instead of praying that God would bring misfortune to people I didn't like, I started praying that God would teach me how to love people I didn't like. Do you see the cross shaped pattern in all this?

The change was really very subtle... But it was genuine. It wasn't magic, or hocus pocus, and it didn't immediately solve problems. But it did give me perspective, and opened me to a relationship. Which gives me strength. Which of itself, is a miracle.

We're still in the season of Easter, we're still celebrating the resurrection of Jesus... So I'd like to ponder, put yourself in the shoes of the disciples after the death and resurrection of Jesus... Talk about awe and wonder! Can you imagine the conversations and all the thoughts being sent in God's direction? As we all know, the most natural thing to do...

It must have been a time of praying for love and one another... A time of experiencing a love flowing in abundance... A time of a new and a surprising kind of unity... And it gave them strength...

Next Sunday, is Pentecost, we will celebrate the Spirit coming upon the disciples. Now, so, what are you praying about these days?

Amen... Let us sing How Great is our God...