

Prayer as a Spiritual Practice: Part 2

As we continue this series of 'reforming into the image of God' through the grace of spiritual disciplines, I wrote last time that perhaps you could see prayer as having three essences: Help. Thanks. Wow. (to borrow from Anne Lamott in her book by the same name.). Last time I focused on the Help aspect of prayer. In this post, I'll explore the essence and the essential of nature of saying Thanks in prayer.

It's harder sometimes than others.

I am always struck by the fact that our communion service liturgy is called The Great Thanksgiving. It is the heart of our relationship with Christ in this meal, the thing that opens us to the mystery of the gift we are about to receive as we kneel or stand at the altar. And as I learned the words of institution, I became aware in a new way that for each element, we say, "He gave thanks" before giving the bread and wine to the disciples on that night when he was going to be arrested and taken away. "He gave thanks."

I learned early on to say thanks at the table in my own childhood home as well, where no meal began without saying the grace; without a moment of pause; without a bowing of head; without a folding of hands. Thank you. And I learned a spontaneous thank you that came from my heart whenever I was surprised by grace. 'Thank you for this sunset,' 'Thank you for our new puppy,' 'Thank you for grandma coming.' And later in my life, I said thanks spontaneously for everything from finding a parking space, getting a new job or getting my health back. And there's nothing wrong with all that. Gratitude can become a really healthy habit that opens the heart and inspires those around you. When I was a pastor at Central Lutheran in Anchorage, I was told that one of their saints, recently departed, left his mark on the congregation; whenever someone asked how he was, he would say simply, "Thankful."

The heart of the prayer of thanks is what this saint was teaching—no matter what—no matter if my joints are hurting, my bank account is low, or the weather is rotten, I can be thankful. When I was on a long retreat during my spiritual direction training, the leaders asked us to get in pairs, take the hands of the person in front of us and give thanks for something very difficult in our lives—in fact, to give thanks for the very thing we most resisted, most irritated us, or was most repugnant. I remember turning abruptly in my chair, looking at Gerald May, and saying, "You've got to be kidding." He said, "I'm not kidding. This is the work of transformation."

Of course, he was right. When Paul encourages 'in everything, give thanks', he wasn't meaning the nice things only. He meant to give thanks as Christ gave thanks, right before he knew he was heading to the cross. No matter what. The depth of that

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prayer does transform us into the image of God, for in that moment, we have given up all control, all judgment, all doubt and simply lay ourselves before God in complete trust. As Anne Lamott says, "God always makes a way out of no way...I don't always believe it, but I know it's true." (p.54) In the midst of things that look hopeless and we feel helpless, there can be revelation. And we see what is important, what is beautiful, what has meaning. And how God is making a way. It's hardly ever easy, but somewhere in there, we can whisper, "Thank you."

I'll let Anne finish this post in her words : "Thanks' is a huge mind-shift, from thinking that God wants our happy chatter and a public demonstration and is deeply interested in our opinions of the people we hate, to feeling quiet gratitude, humbly and amazingly, without shame at having been so blessed. You breathe in gratitude, and you breathe it out, too. Once you learn how to do that, then you can bear ...the unbearable." (p.60-61).

As we leave church to go out to whatever the world presents to us, become aware again of what the final blessing is: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. THANKS be to God!