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7/18/10

Faith and Prayer

Luke 11:1

In the 11th chapter of Luke the disciples recognize that prayer is at the center of Jesus' life. He prays at his baptism. He prays before choosing the disciples. He prays at his transfiguration. This would not have been a surprising discovery for them. For they, like Jesus are Galilean Jews. They have always been taught the importance of prayer. They have also been well trained in the techniques of prayer. But apparently they recognize that there is something different and appealing about Jesus' approach to prayer. For they come to him and ask, "Lord teach us to pray... (Luke 11:1)."

It may be that they saw in Jesus a power of concentration in prayer that they could not replicate on their own. In a famous 17th century sermon John Donne spoke of the challenge of maintaining concentration during prayer. He said:

I throw myself down in my chamber, and I call in and invite God and his angels thither, and when they are there, I ignore God and his angels for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door; I talk on... sometimes I find that I forgot what I was about, but when I began to forget it, I cannot tell. A memory of yesterday's pleasure, a fear of tomorrow's dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine ear, a light in mine eye, an any thing, a nothing, a fancy ... troubles me in prayer (quoted by Peter W. Marty, *Christian Century*, July 13, 2010, page 21).

It is easy for us to imagine that the disciples needed help staying focused in their practice of prayer. All of us who try to pray struggle with this issue. But the difference they see in Jesus' prayer life goes well beyond the issue of concentration. It also has to do with the vitality of faith. And this of course is what the disciples needed most of all. For at the heart of their request that Jesus teach them to pray was the sense that their faith was inadequate. They were longing for the kind of relationship that Jesus had with God. They were looking for a way to forge the kind of bond which so clearly connected Jesus to God. "Teach us to pray" is their cry for help as they look for a way to bring their faith alive.

The disciples' cry for help also goes to the nature of the community that Jesus is creating. Their request for guidance from Jesus makes reference to the fact that John the Baptist has taught his disciples to pray. It was not unusual for rabbis to teach their disciples a particular form of prayer. When this prayer was memorized it served to define the identity of that spiritual community. It is clear that Jesus understood the question in that way because the prayer that he offers is communal in nature. It is a prayer that Jesus' followers say together.

Give us this day our daily bread
and forgive us our sins...

And do not bring us to the time of trial.

The prayer Jesus gives the disciples to memorize and pray together forms them into a community which lives in dependence on God.

The Apostle Paul challenges the Colossian church to become that kind of community in the second chapter of his letter to this church. The Colossian church is threatened by false teachers who

claim that Christ is one among many members of an angelic hierarchy. This was a humanly construed system of thought which denied that Christ could be the sole basis of our lives. A community shaped by this system cannot witness to God's presence in Jesus Christ. Paul challenges the Colossians to reject this heresy.

During a visit to Rome some years ago I went to a chapel in the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo. There I saw Caravaggio's 1601 painting of the Conversion of Saul. The painting shows Saul just after he is thrown off his horse in a scene flooded with light, as he hears the resurrected Christ call him to ministry. One art critic calls the play of supernatural light in this scene one of the most potent images in the history of art (Karen Wilkin, "A Transfiguring Moment," *Wall Street Journal*, March 6-7, 2010, page w14).

But for me, the image in the painting which was most compelling was the depiction of Saul flat on his back, totally helpless after being thrown from his horse. He has his arms outstretched in prayer to embrace the light which has blinded him. It is a transforming moment in which Saul discovers that he lives in dependence on the God who has interrupted his journey. The arms of Saul outstretched in prayer is the spiritual posture that will define the rest of his life. From this moment as Saul becomes Paul, he knows that God in Christ is at work in his midst. This is the truth that Paul wants the Colossians to experience. He calls them be a community of prayer grounded in Christ which lives in dependence on God.

The nature of the community which Christ creates in our midst comes alive in a story told by Michael Lindvall. He writes:

In the early forties a youngish man's appendix ruptured, a medical event that usually was fatal. They rushed him to the hospital. His wife prayed, his church prayed, they all prayed that he might be spared by some miracle. They operated, found the ruptured appendix, and discovered that infection had spilled into his entire lower abdomen. Not good, not good at all. Several days after the surgery, the surgeon came into his hospital room. He told the man what he had found when he operated. It was about the worst he could have anticipated. Then the doctor said that a few days before the operation he had been visited by a pharmaceutical salesman who had left him a sample of a new drug, a powdered form of something called "penicillin." The doctor said that during the operation he thought to himself, "Can't hurt." He sent to his nearby office for the drug sample and sprinkled the entire packet of the stuff inside the guy's open abdomen. The man, against all odds, lived to tell the tale.

Lindvall then poses this question:

Was the commercialization of penicillin, and that salesman's visit, and the packet he happened to leave, and the doctor's memory, all just good science and better luck, or maybe did prayer work? To believe in prayer is to opt for the latter and act upon that choice by praying. I am inclined to believe that prayer often works in ways that don't appear at all miraculous. Answers come in plain clothes rather than angel uniforms; they wear the mask of the ordinary. Perhaps it's true that coincidences are just God's way of maintaining some anonymity.

The community that emerged from Jesus' prayer works like that. This community is rooted in the faith that God is present and active in our midst. Our prayers celebrate that presence even when it is anonymous.

