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Keep Praying

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Text: 1 Corinthians 14:20

In the monastery of Mt. Athos in Greece a group of monks gathers at the beginning of each day. They light their candles, chant their psalms, and pray for the concerns of the world. Day after day. Year after year. Century after century. That is their job: to pray. I think we can learn a lot from them.

Prayer doesn't come easily to me. I've always been amazed and even a little envious of those who confess to having a vibrant prayer life - folks for whom prayer flows from their mouths like streams of living water, whose words and passion echo the heartbeats of the angels crying out to God on behalf of those who wish but can't seem to begin to understand their longings, much less put them into words.

As well, growing up as an Anglican made life difficult when I wanted to pray by myself. The only model I was given was the profound eloquence of the *Book of Common Prayer* with its vigorous beauty, depth of human understanding of both sin and forgiveness, and its soaring cadences – reverberations of the passionately devout utterances of saints past. When it came to piecing my own prayers together, reaching for a word here and a phrase there, I just couldn't measure up to the poetic refrains of those ancient prayers that smouldered in my ears. After a while I simply stopped trying.

But as I listen to myself say that, I wonder if it was just an excuse to stop praying. If not being ranked among the masters disqualified me from doing anything, I would have stopped playing trombone because I don't sound like the guy in the Vancouver Symphony, I would have stopped writing music because it certainly doesn't sound like Beethoven, and I surely would have stopped preaching because I am no Billy Graham or Martin Luther. As I reflect on it, I wonder if the real reason I stopped praying was because I didn't hear anyone answering back. I didn't really know what I was listening for, but I also knew that I wasn't hearing it. When I stepped into the darkness

of my prayer closet I was met with the deafening sound of absence. *God's* absence. And I couldn't shake the funny feeling that, huddled down on my knees feebly pouring out the desires of my heart to a God who wasn't answering back, I looked decidedly silly. But, of course, to whom was I looking silly? If no one was listening, probably no one was watching either.

So I stopped praying altogether.

I must confess, though, that there were times when I muttered a desperate prayer walking unprepared into an exam in university, as if God were in the business of bailing out lazy students who spent too much time in the pub instead of the library. And maybe then God's absence was more an act of divine displeasure than a *bona fide* spiritual crisis.

However, I began really asking questions about prayer when, in my hometown of St. Catharines, Ontario, a 15 year old school girl named Kristen French was kidnapped, sexually tortured, murdered, and dumped on the side of the road. Between the time she disappeared and when her naked body was found, the city cried out to God, day and night, for her safe return. Churches held all-night vigils and 24-hour prayer watches. People gathered in homes to pray; people prayed on the streets. The city was soaked in prayer. When her body was eventually found on the side of a lonely road just outside of the city, the praying stopped. I guess the faithful in the churches of St. Catharines received their answer from God.

I was reminded of W.H. Auden's poem, *Victor; a Ballad*, where Victor is betrayed by his wife. So ...

Victor walked out into the High Street
 he walked to the edge of town;
 he came to the allotments and the rubbish heap
 and his tears came tumbling down.
 Victor looked up at the sunset
 as he stood there all alone;
 cried: "Are you in heaven, Father?"
 But the sky said, "Address not known."¹

I think this is what St. Paul is talking about in tonight's reading: "Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults." Of course, Paul was talking about welcoming outsiders into their community and not to let their speaking in tongues confuse or put up walls between those on the

inside and those on the outside. But I think he could just as easily have been talking about prayer, and how we talk about it.

I think Paul would be telling us to be honest about where we see God and where we do not see God; about where God is powerfully present and where God is devastatingly absent; about where God's fingerprints are all over our lives and where even the rumour of God is almost an offence against the suffering of innocents.

Paul reminds us that he carried, throughout his life, what he called "a thorn in the flesh." He called out to God repeatedly to remove it so that he could get on with the rest of his ministry, but instead of the warmth of divine healing flooding through his body, Paul received a terrible and cold silence, broken only by the divine word, "My grace is sufficient for you." In other words, "I am not at your beck and call. I have given you what you need to carry out your ministry."

So maybe ... just maybe ... we're looking for God in all the wrong places – places where perhaps we've lost sight of God. Chances are we'll look for God's presence in the Bible, in the creeds, in liturgy and worship, in the places where we think God may turn up. And we are assured that indeed we will meet God there. But maybe – just maybe – God is also found in the dark corners of our world. Maybe God is found in the quiet agony of the young woman dying of cancer. Maybe God is found in the awkward conversations of the married couple who after 25 years have become strangers. Maybe God is found in a mother's profound grief upon hearing of her daughter's horrific murder. I don't know. I just wonder.

I wonder because in all my hoping, in all my dreaming, in all my living, I've seen what I can only describe as "God" working in the weirdest places. I've talked with people whose bodies are being eaten alive by cancer who profess profound peace in their spirits. I've seen celebrations of life break out during funerals. I've seen the hardest of hearts break down in liberating sobs of repentance upon hearing the life-renewing message of grace.

So I began to pray again, even when it hurt, even when soured by verbal constipation. I pray because I will not let the powers of darkness triumph in the world. I pray because even just the tiniest glimpse of heaven on earth is enough to tell me that the forces of hell will not prevail. I have learned through hard-won experience that prayer is an act of hope-filled defiance. We pray in spite of evidence

to the contrary. We pray when we see no discernible difference in our lives or in the world. We pray, ultimately, because prayer changes us into that for which we pray, and gives us a peek into the heart of God which the Bible calls the Kingdom of Heaven.

One of my favourite authors, Thomas Merton, once wrote somewhere, “The secret of prayer is a hunger for God.” I think that’s a wonderful beginning. We begin with the hunger for God, not with God’s abundant and abiding presence. We hunger for that which we do not have in abundance. When we don’t have God in abundance we pray with hope and not with certainty, we pray with our hands and our hearts empty, waiting, waiting, and waiting some more, until we are surprised by the grace of God’s renewing presence that nourishes us, changes us, and brings us to the joy of the resurrection.

Maybe you’re not where I am. Maybe prayer comes easily to you. Maybe you see God answer prayer richly in your life and the lives of others. That’s wonderful. I encourage you. You’ve been given an astonishing gift. Keep praying. Keep your eyes open to the handiwork of God. And pray for the rest of us.

And for those of us for whom prayer comes through much toil and effort, I say, keep hungering, keep searching, keep praying, until that day comes when we become what we pray for, and the Kingdom of God arrives in all its fullness. Amen.

Notes

- ¹ W.H. Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1940), quoted in Edmund Steimle, *From Death to Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1973), “Address not Known.”