

UNITY

Scripture Readings: Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

Texts: Acts 1:8, 13-14; John 17:10-11

Over the years I have been asked many times about prayer. The question, more often than not, comes after a time when someone has been praying for a particular outcome and the outcome is not achieved. In such situations, there is a genuine concern about the efficacy of prayer.

After all these years, I admit that I still struggle to answer that question. I think the difficulty comes from the heartbreak of the situation; our hearts are breaking and words do not go deep enough to handle such wounds. I can say things such as prayer is not just supplication or intercession, the “I want” prayers where sometimes we treat God as Santa Claus responding to a wish list. Prayer is also adoration, confession, and thanksgiving, the types of prayers we offer through the whole worship service on Sunday. But such an answer is probably too pedantic and does not relieve the emotional distress.

What I do hope I say is that prayer is really relational dialogue; over time prayer opens us to connecting with God. When we risk connecting with God in a real way, it means that we have entered a relationship. Relationship requires deep listening as well as talking and just as in any conversation we have with someone we trust we may not always like what we hear. A good friend who loves us will sometimes tell us truths with which we may not be comfortable. At the same time, such truths may galvanize us to be transformed.

This response to truth is why I like the prayer at the end of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse in the gospel of John. The gospel writer reports that Jesus offers this prayer knowing that his own brutal death is less than a day away. Unlike the synoptic gospels, the gospel writer of John does not portray Jesus praying in order to pull back or question the coming crisis. Instead Jesus is shown as residing/abiding in perfect trust of his relationship with God and willing to do what must follow.

The opening words of this prayer reaffirm the prologue of the gospel: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1). In the opening verses of the prayer, Jesus is more focused on the relationship he has with God, his trust in God’s love and his mission to share this love with the world. In his willingness to share God’s love, Jesus had been able to create an even

larger circle of relationship; Jesus includes his followers in this growing circle of love. Through the grace and love Jesus has instilled in his followers they are able to become witnesses to the world.

The growing circle of love becomes the work of those who follow Jesus even when Jesus is no longer physically present with us. You may have noticed that Jesus' prayer contains no theological rubrics nor doctrinal certainties, the prayer is solely about a relationship of trust and love. In his relationship with God and his relationship with his followers, Jesus then prays that his followers may be one, as God and he are one. This final sentence of the passage we heard is key: those who follow Jesus are called to come into relationship not only with God but also with one another in trust and love. Through this trust and love, we form community which, if you think about it, can be broken down to 'come unity.' Every time we form community, our action continually utters Jesus' prayer: come unity.

Therefore, prayer is not an ASAP memo sent to God as needed; prayer is an ongoing activity to grow into relationship with God so that we may learn to see God acting in our lives through the community of faith. I have run across the idea several times that when we form faithful relationships with one another, the Christ in me recognizes the Christ in you. Henri Nouwen expanded on this idea when he shared a story where a new friend recognized the presence of Christ in each and went on to say that now only holy ground exists between them.

Unfortunately we live in a world that seems to have forgotten the idea that through Christ's prayer for us we can be one in love and grace. We divide ourselves too easily preferring to demonize those with whom we disagree. Even we who follow Christ divide ourselves; sources I reviewed suggested that there over 38,000 Christian denominations. I would imagine that most divisions occur over some perceived theological issue or doctrinal certitude—the very things Jesus avoided in his prayer! We forget that God calls us into community to widen the circle of God's love and grace, not diminish it. We can disagree with one another over ideas or certain practices but that doesn't have to end the relationship. In the end, each one of us still belongs to God and God has called us to know that we are worthy of God's love. When we close our eyes to the presence of Christ in one another, we have forgotten that prayer is about relationship with God and thereby with one another.

How do we keep this prayer in mind? I am reminded of the story, "The Rabbi's Gift," which has been told in many versions; I share the one found in Scott Peck's book, The Different Drum:

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of antimonastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again," they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving—it was something cryptic—was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas.

Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.¹

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¹ Scott Peck, The Different Drum, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987, p. 1.