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February 8, 2009

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Of Prayer and Passivity

Acts 1: 4a; Matthew 7: 7-11

It was this past Christmas Eve, 2008, (which seems so far away now!), and we were on our usual late-night trek to Birmingham, when suddenly the light rain that had been falling on us since Charlotte morphed into a blinding, torrential monsoon as we neared Atlanta. The HOV lane quickly became as deep as Lake Lanier, visibility seemed less than a ruler length, and I nursed our overstuffed van down the interstate at about 45 miles an hour. Two things kept me going: Margaret Clegg's Christmas tin of wonderful peanut brittle (my favorite vegetable) and listening to the Hawaii Bowl, where Notre Dame was besting Hawaii. Normally, if Notre Dame played North Vietnam, I'd be pulling for North Vietnam, but Lee Gray and I had a bet going, so I was pulling for the Irish. Finally, we emerged from the monsoon, dined at an elegant Waffle House, then arrived in Birmingham at about 2 Eastern time. Though I swore driving over that I wouldn't follow suit this year, I did what I do every Christmas Eve: I waited until everyone else retired to bed, then I untied the top carrier and unloaded all the presents and put them under the tree, especially those extra surprises that I would hide in the dark corners until last. Since the storm had cleared, the night was strangely warm; by the time I finished unpacking I was almost sweating, too overheated to sleep. So I turned on the ceiling fan in our bedroom and lay on the floor under it, finding myself spontaneously praying unto God a word of thanks for the divine watchcare that guided us through the dangerous storm, and thanking God for providing me the energy to survive yet another arduous Advent season, and for allowing us, once again, to gather as a family in my parents' house to celebrate Christmas. As I lay under that fan, allowing its cooling breeze to waft over me, enriching me, calming me, relaxing me, I felt enveloped in the carol Silent Night's "heavenly peace." I remember thinking, "This is what prayer is supposed to do. It is meant to restore one's soul."

Our Lord says to us quite plainly,

"Ask of God and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."

Our Lord depicts God as a Father who gives good things to those who commune with Him through prayer.

Even so, many Christians – yes, even Christians! -- secretly regard prayer as a waste of time.

I think of a conversation I had with a church member in a prior congregation who told me that he saw no reason to pray. "Should I ask God to help me win my cases?" he asked. (He was a lawyer, of course.)

"Should I be asking God to tip the scales of justice in my client's favor?"

Why should I beg God for some result that favors me? What is the point of prayer?"

The irony was, this man was known about town for his irascible temper.

Everyone commented on how he seemed to live in a state of perpetual anxiety.

He had a well-developed intellect and an incomplete soul. And everyone seemed to know it but him.

His soul could have been so much richer, so much broader, so much more mature, if he had only submitted to the discipline of prayer. But I dared not say that to him. He was an older man, and I was a young one.

I only mildly observed that our Lord, who was more attuned to God's will

than any human who ever walked the earth, found the discipline of prayer to be a positive, nourishing discipline and that he might profit from following our Lord's example.

Yet there are so many Christians like my former parishioner, folks sure that prayer doesn't really do any good. They know they are supposed to pray, but prayer hangs over their heads as a dark, mysterious, pointless duty. They fear that to pray is to be engaged in shamelessly begging God

to give them what they want.

What if I had said to my friend, “Do you think that *thinking* helps advance the Kingdom of God?”

he would have said, “Sure. Thinking, envisioning, planning, they all help God’s work get done.”

If I had asked, “Do you think *doing* God’s will helps advance the Kingdom of God?” he would have said, “Of course. Acts of service, stewardship and sacrifice make a great difference in the world.”

He would have said, “Thinking makes things happen; doing makes things happen.

But prayer is quiescent. It is literally a waste of time. After all what does prayer do?”

Let us begin by realizing what prayer does not do.

Prayer does not manipulate God.

Remember, our relationship with God is supposed to be such that we are commanded to be communicating to God our concerns, our needs and our desires. But our prayers do not manipulate God.

God has a lot of experience with prayer. God knows how to say “No” to us

when our request is wrong for us, when our request is contrary to the divine will.

I refer back to my friend’s example. He didn’t necessarily need to ask God to help him win his cases.

But he did need to ask God to enrich his spirit, to expand his tolerance,

to soften his temper, to broaden his perspective and to enhance his graciousness.

There were a host of spiritual gifts that this man could have opened and grafted into his being if only he had embraced the discipline of prayer.

He didn’t need to manipulate God, didn’t need to beg for any special favors from God.

But he could have improved himself daily had he done nothing more than say each morning in utter sincerity with that publican of old, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

Many of us think of prayer as a form spiritual calisthenics, an act of positive thinking, a bit of auto-suggestion.

There is some truth to that view. If you start your day thinking God that will commune with you because you have asked God to do so, yes, you live with an enhanced sense of anticipation.

But the truth is, the spiritual exercise of prayer only really has merit

if it connects us to a real Power and Presence.

When Isaiah says, “Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles,” he speaks with the expectation of one who believes that prayer opens one’s being to be filled with a real spiritual Energy.

When our Lord goes into the Garden of Gethsemane and falls on his knees in anguish and prays, “Not my will but Thine be done,” he is expecting to connect to a real Presence

who will convey to him a real Strength, so that he can carry the real cross that awaits him.

When Ralph Waldo Emerson describes prayer as a “river that flows out of a region I do not see, pouring for a season its stream into me,” he is talking of an act in which the real, living Water of God flows into the dry channel of our lives.

Ask! our Lord says of us. Seek! Knock! Open your being unto God and in so doing, create within yourself a bay into which the tide of God’s presence can flow into your being through the discipline of prayer, so God’s living Water can then flow out of you into a thirsty world.

When our Lord enters the Garden of Gethsemane and prays, “Not my will but Thine be done,”

he is not begging God, he is not trying to manipulate God, he is not seeking a particular outcome for his life.

Indeed, our Lord is not asking God *for*, he is asking God *that*.

He is not begging God for a particular result, though he would love for the cup of crucifixion

to pass from him. He would love not to be crucified. But he is not praying for a particular outcome.

Rather he is praying *that* – that God’s will and not his own will be done. He is praying,

‘Whatever comes, my Lord, give me the strength to bear my cross.’

Any of us could benefit from offering that prayer every single day.

And the truth is, every Sunday we glibly pray a prayer almost exactly like that. Every Sunday we say,

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.”
Thy will be done! But how in God’s name are we to know what God’s will is
unless we develop our powers of passivity and receptivity?
How can we *do* God’s will until we first pause to *perceive* God’s will.
Thy will be done? How can we know such a thing
unless we commune with God through the discipline of prayer?

I remind you gentlemen out there that next weekend is Valentine’s Day.
Let’s say for the sake of argument that you decide to do something lovely for your significant other.
Let’s say that you opt for a “high-brow evening.”
You decide to buy tickets to the Blumenthal Theatre to hear Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.
You clean your tux, you clear your schedule, you fight the traffic --
(you realize, hey, this is not worth all the effort!) – but nevertheless, you do all these things –
finally, you are there. You have arrived at the theatre on time. You are there!
You have hustled, hustled, hustled to make it happen. But here’s the thing:
once you are there you cannot hustle your way into appreciating the experience.
To appreciate the experience truly you must quieten your spirit, you must open your being,
you must exercise a passivity that results in receptivity, in order to enjoy the power of the music.
You cannot hustle your way into enjoying the music.
Nor can you always hustle your way into understanding God’s will.
You cannot always understand it by thinking or by doing.
Sometimes you can only gain appreciation for God by being passive and receptive to God’s Spirit.
You might say, “Ah, Dr. Kremer, that is easy: anyone can make themselves receptive and quiet.”
I have two words for you: “Try it. Try it.”
Try for fifteen minutes every day to quieten your spirit before God. Just try it.
I think of an old Archbishop of Canterbury who was asked by a skeptical reporter if he had talked to God
that day. “Yes,” the Archbishop replied. “For how long?” came the inevitable question.
“About a minute.” “That’s not very long,” said the journalist.
“No,” said the Archbishop, “but it took me twenty-nine minutes of preparation to make the connection.”
Such is the testimony of a man who understands how the process of passivity and receptivity
leads to communion with God.

You might protest, “Dr. Kremer, I don’t have fifteen minutes to devote to prayer.”
My answer is, “You don’t have time *not* to do it.”
You cannot go through life trying to speak the Word of God,
until you have first paused in passivity to hear the Word of God!
You cannot try to live the Word until you have first received the Word of God.
You can go and go and go and do and do and do for only so long
before your faith becomes dry and superficial.
If an airplane arrived at the Charlotte-Douglas Airport after a long trans-Atlantic flight,
would you want to hop on that plane immediately? No!
You would want it hauled into a hangar, refurbished, refitted, refueled.
You would want the engine fine-tuned. You would want that plane thoroughly prepared for the next journey.
So, too, you cannot go through life, embarking on flight after flight
and never stopping to feed your soul afresh. You cannot do it. You will destroy yourself!
If you went to your physician depressed, distressed, broken in body and spirit,
You would not hear your doctor say to you,
“My friend, you simply need to work harder. You need to do more.”
No, that physician is going to say,
“You’ve got to relax. You must rest and recuperate if you are going to function.
You need to take some time off and re-tool.

Only after you have done something for yourself can you do anything for anybody else.”

Some of you might say, ““Dr. Kremer, I’m not very good at prayer.”

I will say to you what some of you have heard me say before,

“Anything worth doing is worth doing badly.”

If you are not any good at prayer, you will not get better at it by not doing it!

You become more accomplished in the discipline of prayer by doing it until it

becomes such a part of your daily schedule that it becomes a part of your being.

Then you find that your communion with God takes place at a more profound level.

Let me leave you with the parable of the pot roast.

When I was a kid, every Sunday morning I watched my mother prepare a big pot roast.

Every Sunday I watched her take that pot roast, rub it with salt, pepper and spices,

put it in a big black kettle with beef bouillon, cutting up some onions, carrots and potatoes, too.

(Some of you can smell that pot roast already.)

I would watch my mom put the kettle on the stove, turn the temperature on high, and we would take off for church. When we would return, the aroma of that pot roast could be smelled from the driveway.

My parents were going off on an extended trip, but I said, “I am going to cook the pot roast anyway.”

My mom asked, “Do you want me to give you any instructions?” and I replied,

“Mom, I’ve seen you cook that pot roast every Sunday all my life.

I don’t have time for instructions. I am late to go play ball.”

My folks left, I got the pot roast out, rubbed on all the spices, poured in the bouillon,

cut up the carrots, onions and potatoes, and put the stove on high, and took off for church.

When I returned, there was indeed an aroma wafting out into the sidewalk --

a stench that could be smelled for miles.

When I looked in that kettle I found that my pot roast resembled a small piece of charcoal.

When my mom returned home a week later she stepped into the kitchen, took one whiff and said,

“You burned the pot roast, didn’t you?”

All because I didn’t have time to listen and learn the crucial detail that you only put the stove on high for a few minutes, and when you leave for church, you turn the dial to low.

I was all activity – no passivity, no receptivity. I paid the price.

So, too, when the disciples were trying to heal someone of his illness,

they said the words that Jesus said, they did the actions that Jesus did,

they made the motions that Jesus made,

but when our Lord arrived he had to perform the healing himself.

All the disciples could ask later was, “Lord, why couldn’t we do it?”

Jesus answered “This kind of healing can only be done through prayer.”

That was a parable of sorts, too. After the Lord had ascended into heaven, and the disciples were left in Jerusalem, they ached to do God’s work, but this time they didn’t hastily run out into the world.

This time they waited. They waited in a spirit of passivity and receptivity.

They waited until the Spirit fell upon them at Pentecost – then they went out into the world.

I suspect that they followed that formula every day for the rest of their lives.

We would do well to do the same.

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