

Our Need to Pray



Unless you somehow have a foot outside of your culture, the culture will swallow you whole. Daniel Berrigan wrote that and it's true too in this sense: Unless you can drink in strength from a source outside yourself, your natural proclivities for paranoia, bitterness, and hatred will invariably swallow you whole.

The disciples in Luke's Gospel understood this. They approached Jesus and asked him to teach them how to pray because they saw him doing things that they did not see anyone else doing. He was able to meet hatred with love, to genuinely forgive others, to endure misunderstanding and opposition without giving in to self-pity and bitterness, and to retain within himself a center of peace and non-violence. This, they knew, was as extraordinary as walking on water, and they sensed that he was drawing the strength to do this from a source outside him, through prayer.

They knew they themselves were incapable of resisting bitterness and hatred and they wanted to be as strong as Jesus and so they asked him: Lord, teach us to pray. No doubt they imagined that this would simply be a question of learning a certain technique; but as the Gospels make clear, linking to a divine source outside of ourselves isn't always easy or automatic, even for Jesus, as we see from his struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, his "agony in the garden".

Jesus, himself, had to struggle mightily at times to ground himself in God as we see from his prayer in Gethsemane. His struggle there is described as an "agony", and this needs to be carefully understood. "Agony" was a technical term used at the time for athletes. Before entering the stadium or arena for a contest, athletes would first work their bodies into a sweat, a warm lather, an agony, to make their muscles warm and ready for the contest. The Gospels tell us that Jesus also worked himself into a sweat, except in his case he sweated blood as he readied himself in his heart for the contest, the test, he was about to enter, his passion.

And what was that contest? The test he was readying himself for wasn't as it is commonly believed an agonizing over the decision whether to let himself be crucified or whether to invoke divine power and save himself from this humiliation and death. That was never the issue in his struggle in Gethsemane. He had long before accepted that he was going to die. The question was how, how would he die, in love or in bitterness?

In the end, it was a struggle to strengthen his will so that he would die with a loving, warm, forgiving heart. And it was a struggle; a positive outcome was in doubt. Amidst all the darkness, hatred, bitterness, injustice, and misunderstanding that surrounded him, amidst everything that stood unfairly against him and was antithetical to his person and message, Jesus struggled mightily to cling to a source that could give him the strength to resist the hatred and violence around him, that could give him the heart to forgive his enemies, that could give him the graciousness to forgive the good thief, and that could give him the inner strength to turn humiliation, pain, and injustice into compassion rather than bitterness.

The Gospels put this metaphorically as a struggle to "stay awake", namely, to stay awake to his inner identity as God's Beloved, an identity that he appropriated at his baptism and which shaped his very consciousness during all the years of his ministry. In Gethsemane, amidst everything that invites him (and us) into moral amnesia, Jesus manages to stay awake to his deeper reality and to his identity as God's beloved. His disciples don't. As the Gospels tell us, during Jesus' great struggle they fell asleep and their sleep ("out of sheer sorrow") was more than physical fatigue. This is evident when, immediately after Jesus has managed to ground himself against hatred and non-violence, Peter succumbs to both and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant. Peter was asleep, in more ways than one, in a sleep that signifies the absence of prayer in one's life.

Prayer is meant to keep us awake, which means it's meant to keep us connected to a source outside our of natural instincts and proclivities which can keep us grounded in love, forgiveness, non-retaliation, and non-violence when everything inside of us and around us screams for bitterness, hatred, and retaliation. And if Jesus had to sweat blood in trying to stay connected to that source when he was tested, we can expect that the cost for us will be the same, struggle, agony, wanting in every fiber of our being to give in, clinging to love precariously by the skin of our teeth, and then having God's angel strengthen us only when we've been writhing long enough in the struggle so that we can let God's strength do for us what our own strength cannot do.

Lord, teach us to pray!

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