

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Oct 30th 2014

Paul exhorts us to “Pray at every opportunity in the Spirit.” What is prayer? What is prayer for us? How do we pray? How should we pray “in the Spirit?”

Many of us were formed as young people with formalistic, ritualistic prayer. We were taught the standard prayers, and encouraged to say them often. Many times our penance in the sacrament of reconciliation would be “three Our Fathers and five Hail Marys.” Many times I raced through these prayers as quickly as possible so I could check off the box that I had finished this little task and could move on to the next, more important thing in my life.

And sometimes prayer seemed almost trivial – lost a glove? Say a prayer. Big test tomorrow? Say a prayer. Frightened of a medical test result? Say a prayer.

It was a revelation for me to learn that prayer need not be constrained by these wonderful examples of piety, that prayer could be a conversation between the Almighty and me. This was both frightening and empowering simultaneously. As my wife and children can attest, I am not always the best conversationalist. How could I carry on a decent conversation with God if I couldn't do so with the woman and children I love? But I also felt empowered – I didn't need someone else's words to talk with the source of all my love, I only needed to start the conversation in whatever way I could.

And there is the whole “how do I know God is listening, and how do I know what God is saying to me” discomfort and frustration. After I would go through the quieting process, and felt like I was in a place to listen and have this conversation, I wasn't very confident that I was in fact hearing God so much as listening to my subconscious tell me what I thought I wanted to hear. Troubling, no?

So, Paul's context is very helpful – pray in the Spirit – pray with the Spirit as a companion on this journey I am on. It is a beautiful mystery in itself, worthy of contemplation, to consider the many ways in which God can be manifest in our lives, if we only pay attention. God's Spirit is always there for us, and comes to us in time of need and times of celebration. When I find myself gripped by a spirit of desolation, I know that if I open myself, I will be uplifted by the Spirit of Consolation. When I realize I am enthralled by a spirit of pride, my prayer can bring me the Spirit of Humility to balance my life. When I become aware that I am guided by a spirit of selfishness, my prayer calls the Spirit of Compassion so I might open myself to others. When in so many moments I find I am pulled away from my true self, my prayer can bring me the Spirit of Love, the Spirit of Knowledge, the Spirit of Joy, the Spirit of Sorrow – whatever I most need from my God to bring me back to where I am called.

And when I realize my good fortune, or feel the love of those around me, or am moved by a beautiful sunset or warm sunshine on my back, I know that the Spirit of Gratitude is on my heart and I am humbled and thankful for being created by a Loving God.

For me, praying in the Spirit means realizing that God's gifts to me are not always positive boons, but can be challenging and negative. But in all of these, God's Spirit is present, available, open, and nourishing, willing to share with me whatever I am taking from the situation, and being my partner in moving forward.

And God's constant presence in our lives, I have come to realize, is the source for why we pray for the lost glove. God certainly could find the glove for me, but the real value of the prayer is that I am coming to God from where I am in the moment and seeking God's solace in my current frustration.

Whether God helps me find the glove is not so much important as that I have expressed in a different way my dependence on God, my belief not so much in God's power to find gloves, but in God's unending love of me and my life.

And so my prayer today is for the gift to be aware of where I am in every moment, and to have the strength to set aside whatever human frailty is keeping me from praying for the Spirit to guide me to where I am called.

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