

28 September 2014

More Than Words: Prayers of Contemplation

Luke 10:38-42

One of my themes throughout this series on prayer has been that prayer is more than we usually think; that it's more than setting aside a time away from the rest of our lives to say words to God, usually asking for something. Prayer is more than that. In earlier sermons we saw that prayer is more than just asking for stuff; it can be a casual conversation or even an angry blowing-off-steam. We also saw that prayer doesn't have to be something we take time out of the rest of our lives to do; it can be an attitude of awareness of God that we hold with us *as we go about our lives*. Indeed, prayer doesn't have to involve words at all.

So how did we ever get our narrow little definition of prayer? What happened? I think the Protestant Reformation happened. Without doing a history lesson, let me try to explain what I mean. The Protestant Reformation began around the year 1500, as a revolt against abuses of the church at that time. The Reformation's primary themes were that we were saved by the grace of God, not by doing good works, and that the authority of scripture overruled every church tradition. I am very much a Protestant Christian, and I cling to both of those themes. But amid all this upheaval, we also lost some things; above all, Protestants lost all sense of the mystery of God. The Reformation coincided with the dawning Age of Reason, when Europe was rediscovering science and history and logic and philosophy. All the great Protestant Reformers were intellectuals, and their reform was built on reason and logical argument from scripture. In Protestant worship the sermon – rather than the mystery of Holy Communion – became the center of the worship service, and Protestant prayer – everything else Protestant – became words, words, words.

We completely forgot about what is called the “Contemplative Tradition.” The medieval contemplative was one whose entire life revolved around seeking the presence of God. This is more than the Brother Lawrence example I talked about a couple of weeks ago. Brother Lawrence invited God along as he washed dishes and did the shopping, but the medieval contemplative would stop doing everything else, so as to be simply still in the presence of God. Now it's probably already occurred to you that this may not be practical for you. You'd have to be, say, a monk living in a solitary cell in a monastery, who doesn't have to earn a living because Brother Lawrence is downstairs cooking for him. None of us who have to make money to pay a mortgage can be that sort of contemplative. Maybe not, but we can still learn much from how contemplatives pray.

Contemplative prayer is prayer that does not try to achieve anything. Let me say that again: *contemplative prayer is prayer that does not try to achieve anything*. Do you understand how utterly foreign that is to our usual way of thinking? How many times have you heard the question “Does prayer work?” For us pragmatic Americans, it's all about meeting project goals, but that attitude is utterly foreign to the contemplative. In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th century manual for beginning contemplatives, the anonymous author defines prayer this way: “In itself, prayer is simply a reverent, conscious openness to God” (p. 98).

Sounds good, but how do we do that? Well, the first step is simply to *stop talking*. An ancient Syrian contemplative, Isaac of Ninevah, says bluntly: “Every man who delights in a multitude of words, even though he says admirable things, is empty within. If you love truth, be a lover of silence” (Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 30). The gentler soul who wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing* says it more nicely: “Contemplatives rarely pray in words but if they do, their words are few. The fewer the better, as a matter of fact; yes and a word of one syllable is more suited to the spiritual nature of this work than longer ones” (p. 95). A prayer of one short word; does it make any difference which word? Well, some. *The Cloud of Unknowing* recommends these: “help” and “sin” and “love” and “God.”

From *Cloud* again, “Why do you suppose that this little prayer of one syllable is powerful enough to pierce the heavens? Well, it is because it is the prayer of a man’s whole being” (p. 96). When we are intensely focused on God, we do not have time for eloquence. Look, if you’re trapped in a burning house, you don’t say, “O passers-by in the street, you who have in your breast a glimmer of compassion, look up and see my distress, here leaning from this window, and have mercy on my plight, and reaching forth in good will bring hither a ladder that I may descend from this desperate situation in safety, or if that be not thy will, reach into thy pockets and dial 911, summoning hence those who may give me aid.” No, we say, “*Help!*” And that’s when they know we mean it. There is an inverse relationship between the number of our words and the earnestness of our meaning.

But just because we’re praying only one word does not mean that contemplative prayer only takes a second. No, it may be only one word, but it is a word that is preceded with silence and followed by silence, and then is quietly repeated. The contemplative prayer is a prayer of waiting. It is waiting without explanation, without action, without busy-ness.

Without busy-ness. That’s important, and it brings us to our scripture for today. Medieval contemplatives loved the of Mary and Martha. Now, we hear that story and almost invariably identify with Martha, who got things *done*. But Jesus said, “Martha, you are distracted by many things, but there is only one thing needed. Mary, who has chosen simply to sit at my feet, has chosen the better part.” Contemplation is putting aside the many for the sake of the One; setting aside many things, and many words, in order to be with the One.

One more thing. In contemplative prayer, we also put aside Reason. As I said, we Protestants have a long tradition of thinking deep thoughts about God. That’s fine. Now stop it. Nothing prevents us from truly experiencing God in relationship more than thinking *about* God as a question of theological debate. From the *Cloud of Unknowing*:

“Try to understand this point. Rational creatures such as men and angels possess two principal faculties, a knowing power and a loving power. No one can fully comprehend the uncreated God with his knowledge; but each one, in a different way, can grasp him fully through love. Truly this is the unending miracle of love: that one loving person, through his love, can embrace God . . . for [we were] created to love and everything else was created to make love possible” (p. 50)

Have you ever looked around a restaurant at dinner time, at the different couples that are dining there? Do you know how to tell the couples who are in a new dating relationship? They’re the ones who are talking. Please don’t misunderstand me: I’m not being critical of marriage, implying that married people have somehow lost the magic and no longer talk or something like that. No, what I’m saying is that when you have loved someone for a while, you no longer *have* to talk. Silence is no longer uncomfortable, and conversation is no longer forced. Some of my best talks with people I love happen on long drives. You’re together, going the same direction, neither really needing anything from the other, able to talk whenever you want, but mostly just being quiet in each other’s presence. Contemplative prayer is kind of like that: it is riding in comfortable silence with God. And every now and then one of you says simply, “I love you.” Sometimes it’s you; sometimes it’s God. And then you are silent again, together.