

May Your Life Be A Prayer

November 1, 2020

A few weeks ago, I reflected here about memorizing, or learning things by heart. My suggestion was that we not only memorize foundational concepts like the 10 Commandments, but that we actually take them to heart, figure out the depth of what they're about, and try to really live them.

Today I'd like to suggest that what memorizing is to by heart, a habit is to spiritual practice.

Let me back up. For all of the time I spent in Sunday School, I really only remember two teachers. One, because he was particularly pious, even though really not very effective. The biggest thing I remember from that year is that the faster we got through his planned lesson, the sooner he let us outside to play kickball.

The other was the opposite. She was a divorcee at a time when that was scandalous for a small town Sunday School teacher, and I remember hearing loud whispers during a church potluck that she hung around the local tavern. AND, she made the faith come alive for my little 3rd grade soul!

She's the one who had us memorize the 10 Commandments, but also helped us unpack their living power. She's the one who first helped me to understand the critical connection between the crucifixion and resurrection. And she was the one who taught us the habit of offering a quick prayer every time you hear a siren. She said, "No matter what, when you hear a siren, it means there's some kind of danger," and in so doing, she started me on a lifelong journey of seeking spiritual practice, or what the secular world would call habits.

Both of these people—the wonderful woman, who couldn't tick off most of the boxes for a typical Sunday School teacher, and the pious man who didn't have a way with kids but who saw a need in his church and tried to fill it—are two of my saints, and they came to mind this week as our church celebrates Memorial Sunday, a worship celebration in which we lift up the lives of our church members and other loved ones who have died in the past year. I was reminded of this habit (or spiritual practice) of praying when you hear a siren earlier this week when I read a sermon by Lisa Doege, a Unitarian minister in the Twin Cities. I'd like to share much of that sermon with you now, because every once in a while I read something and say, "I couldn't say it better if I tried!" Doege makes this connection between the secular idea of developing habits and the more theological idea of spiritual practices, and then explores what prayer practice might look like in the here and now:

This past summer...I vowed to make my reaction upon seeing political yard signs a spiritual discipline. Instead of swearing silently or aloud, instead of seething inwardly or questioning the intelligence, sanity and moral character of the people who put up the signs, I would pray for them. Not condescension--*oh, bless their*

heart! Nor a prayer to change their minds or hearts. But a prayer *for* them. A blessing. A prayer that they be seen and heard, that they know they are held, every bit of their body and soul, held in a Love that is deep and wide and complete.

As this 2020 campaign season has moved into its second and third decade, coinciding almost entirely with the first seven months of pandemic, my commitment to that spiritual practice has faltered. I'm exhausted and angry and afraid. My patience is nearly depleted. And all my arrogance and self-righteousness are close to the surface. Interrupting my unfiltered rage and judgement with this spiritual practice has gotten more difficult over time, rather than smoother and more authentic through repetition. Still, I don't want my primary default response to even a small part of the world to be a curse. I don't want the bile that it creates in me or the malevolence it unleashes to be what I put into the world. So I keep calling myself back to prayer, even if the swearing and name-calling come first. I have (three) more days to practice... And I, and you, and all of us, have many opportunities each day, in campaign season and beyond the election, to let both ordinary, integral moments of our lives and crucial, moments out of time, be a prayer.

To my mind one of the great definitions of prayer appears in novelist Elizabeth George's first Inspector Lynley mystery, "A Great Deliverance" (in which we read of the main character Tommy Lynley):

He had never thought of himself as much of a praying man, but as he sat in the car in the growing darkness and the minutes passed, he knew what it was to pray. It was to will goodness out of evil, hope out of despair, life out of death. It was to will dreams into existence and spectres into reality. It was to will an end to anguish and a beginning to joy.

It's a powerful, elegant passage, and says something important about prayer—but for a faith leader's purposes it doesn't say enough...

Since Elizabeth George is a novelist not a theologian, it's ok that she drops that nugget into the book and leaves it there...

(But) since I'm a preacher I get to pick up that nugget and do my job: pondering aloud (and encouraging us to embrace) what it looks like outside of the pages of book, in the embodied lives we live, to will goodness out of evil, hope out of despair, life out of death, to will an end to anguish and a beginning to joy. I think we have to know that first, before we can begin to consider whether or not it works, or even what it means for prayer to work.

I believe prayer often begins exactly as George has Lynley describe: with a fervent and perhaps pre-cognitive willing; a cry to whatever powers may be: make it so. The willing is the seed, the germ, the spark of prayer, but if the process ends with the willing, it never becomes fully prayer. Action, our volitional human

action, transforms the seed, the spark, into whole, potent, possibility generating prayer.

Renowned 20th century Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, when asked if he had had time to pray while he was in Selma marching with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, replied, “I prayed with my feet.” Heschel surely had uttered—in his silent heart and in his audible voice, in private devotions and in public worship—hundreds of prayers for civil rights, for an end to violence, for hearts to crack open and turn toward love and justice. He, and Dr. King, and all the other faith leaders and lay leaders and private citizens of all ages who walked across the bridge that day, on the third attempt, in the shadow of Bloody Sunday, surely had all willed goodness out of evil, anguish into joy countless times. And he, they all, knew that the prayer was incomplete without the action of their feet. If willing alone was prayer enough the march from Selma to Montgomery would not have taken place, would never even been imagined.

Doege goes on from there to offer powerful, timely examples of how people here and now are praying with their feet:

- By standing in line to vote and by working at the polls—I know that Steve Jones and Seong-Kyung Graham and Heather Collins are working at the polls, and imagine more of you are as well—we are praying with our feet.
- By working in healthcare and other essential services and donning PPE and quarantining from loved ones, folks are praying with their feet.
- By protesting and educating ourselves and standing up with and for our black and brown brothers and sisters, our LGBTQIA brothers and sisters, and for the children separated from their parents at the border, we are praying with our feet.
- By reaching out to the quiet people, the anxious people, the folks we know who live alone or who may be struggling, be it with a phone call, a loaf of banana bread, an “I’m thinking of you card,” you’re praying with your feet.

The Gospel passage recommended for celebrations of Memorial Sunday which we read today is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, commonly called the Beatitudes, because of its linguistic form. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

As I reflect on the lives of my only two memorable Sunday School teachers, as I reflect on the lives of the saints of our church who died in the last year and all of our beloved departed, and as I reflect on the very real struggles of living a life of faith amidst this pandemic-election season, I can’t help but think of how the lives of our ancestors in the faith intersect with Rev. Doege’s idea of letting our lives be our prayer.

Friends, in Jesus’ greatest sermon he told us blessed are those who grieve, blessed are those who are persecuted as they engage in righteousness, blessed are the pure in heart, not because of what those people DO, but because of the energy those states of being put out into the world. I’m uncomfortable with the idea that our mourning, our meekness,

our purity of heart causes God's blessing, but I'm confident that within those states of being, God's blessing is found.

I know this has been a really tough year for a lot of you, and this upcoming week holds a lot of anxiety for many. In the midst of that, my prayer for all of us this week is that we will allow this truth of the faith to seep into the depths of our beings:

God sees you.

God hears you.

God loves you, at the core of who you are.

And within whatever your struggle is, whatever your pain is, whatever your anxiety is, God is there to bless you. May your life, like the lives of our beloved departed, be a prayer. Amen.

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Psalm 43, Matthew 5:1-12
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