

WHAT COUNTS AS PRAYER?

(05/19/19)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 28:1-10

John 15:12-17

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends.” (John 15:12-15)

I had an interesting experience last Sunday. Following our worship service, within which we celebrated an adult baptism, an infant baptism, and the baptism of two children, we held a reception for the children and their families. During the reception, I had the opportunity to spend time with the grandmother of two of the children. Although she and I come from different religious backgrounds, we found that we agreed on practically everything regarding religion.

The woman and I must have talked for half an hour. She is of a Roman Catholic background, though she no longer attends church. She began by saying that she found my explanation of the theology of baptism-- the baptism of infants, children, and adults very interesting. (As you might guess, the conversation was off to a good start! Telling me that she not only liked but actually *learned something* from my sermon, made her an instant friend!). Some might consider this a low threshold for friendship, but it works for me.

The woman liked the idea that we are not baptized as Congregationalists, Methodists, or Roman Catholics; we are baptized as Christians. We later confirm and then live out our baptism within a certain religious community. She resonated with the idea that though we may find our own religious tradition meaningful, we are all Christians, and there are different paths up the same mountain.

The woman numbers among those who have been deeply hurt by the sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church, not only the widespread abuse of children by priests, but also the cover-up by diocesan bishops. Though we agreed on the extent of the abuse and the seriousness of the offense, our feelings differed a little.

The woman felt sadness, disgust, anger, a sense of loss, and a feeling of betrayal. I could identify with the sadness, disgust, and anger, but not with the sense of loss or the feeling of betrayal. Since my religious beliefs were formed within the Protestant tradition, I was never taught to put priests on a pedestal or regard them as God’s representatives on earth. Since I never bought into what I feel is an illusion or perhaps even a delusion, I have not been dis-

illusioned by the sexual abuse or the coverup, and I have not experienced feelings of betrayal from clergy or an institution that I trusted. I really don't trust institutions.

The woman and I speculated about what might have given rise to this serious betrayal of trust. Is it simply an abuse of the absolute power that was given to (and happily accepted by) priests? Is it attributable to a systemic problem in the religious formation of priests, a formation process that causes the developmental process to become fixated and prevents full growth into psychosexual maturity? Is it, in Jungian terms, an acting out of the repressed individual and collective shadow of the church? Ultimately, this isn't my problem to solve. I find myself much more interested in the healing of the victims, the healing of both their psychological and their spiritual wounds in psychotherapy.

I am well aware of the pain that the widespread sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church has caused not only to the victims, but also to parishioners who feel that this betrayal of a sacred trust has in some way cut them off from God. I recall talking with a woman many years ago whose pastor had been found guilty of sexually abusing over a hundred children. The woman told me she lost not only her pastor, but also her church, her faith, her ability to pray, and her relationship with God. That's a very serious spiritual loss!

The woman with whom I was conversing last week, fortunately, did not fall into this category. She had lost a sense of trust in the institutional church, she was disillusioned, but she had not lost her faith in God, had not lost her relationship with God. I told her how happy I was to hear this!

I also reminded her that the Roman Catholic Church is not reducible to the sum of its sins, just as we as individuals (thankfully!) are not reducible to the sum of our sins. The mass is a beautiful expression of worship, a powerfully symbolic ceremony, and it feeds millions of parishioners spiritually. I find a deep affinity with the teachings of mystics like Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, and John of the Cross, monastics like Thomas Merton, and founders of religious orders like Francis of Assisi. I embrace the doctrine of the Communion of Saints, though I understand the saints to be not only historical figures but also dynamic archetypes of the collective unconscious that shape our psyche and our relationship with life in various ways.

I have several close friends who are Roman Catholic priests or members of Roman Catholic religious communities. These priests and nuns are doing some wonderful work, are carrying on a true Christian ministry in the various settings where they serve. In fact, when I

was admitted to Brigham & Women's Hospital last summer for my shoulder replacement surgery, I asked a dear friend and long-time colleague, a member of the Sisters of Notre Dame, to visit me. Kathy is the head of the Department of Chaplaincy Services at Brigham & Women's.

The woman and I found that we were in agreement with regard to the matter of what "happens" to children who die without having been baptized. The woman said that she could not believe that the God who was revealed to us in Jesus would consign an unbaptized child to limbo. I agreed, but I pointed out that the belief that unbaptized children go to limbo was never an official doctrine or even a teaching of the church. One of the recent popes (I believe it was Benedict), made this clear not too long ago. I told her that if she checked the Catechism of the Catholic Church, a copy of which I have in my office, she will find no mention of limbo.

I also told her that through having served for several years as a psychological consultant to the Roman Catholic Marriage Tribunal in Providence, I have come to understand and appreciate the deep truth and the potential for healing that can take place through the process of annulment. I find the church's distinction between a legal marriage and a sacramental marriage to be valid and helpful, not only for Roman Catholics, but also for Protestants who find themselves in a relationship that falls short of what would be called a spiritual marriage. I love it when I can teach a Roman Catholic something about his/her faith!

Surprisingly, we both agreed about a woman's right to her body, even the right to obtain an abortion. The woman said she could not choose an abortion herself, but she did not think it was right to force her religious beliefs on others. I told her that the same principle applies to the matter of gay marriage. Although I would officiate at a gay wedding in our church because it is consistent with our religious belief that we are all children of God, I have no right to demand that Father Flynn at St. Matthew parish up the street do so in his church. I am sorry that the Roman Catholic Church treats women and LGBTQ people as second-class citizens (I don't think Jesus would approve), but I believe that a religious organization or institution should not be required to conduct a ceremony that is inconsistent with their beliefs. This, by the way, does not mean that we have the right to deprive anyone of his/her constitutional rights.

There was one point, however, where I disagreed with and actually had to correct my new friend. In the process of describing where she stands not only in relation to her religious community but also in her spiritual journey, the woman said that she was no longer able to pray.

This remark startled and saddened me. I regard prayer as not only an expression of our faith in God and Jesus, but as an integral part of our spiritual journey, our religious and spiritual formation. I told the woman that I was sorry to hear this.

Then the woman told me that although she can't pray any more, she does talk to God and Jesus throughout her day. I have a hunch that you know how I received this! I told her that, whether she realized it or not, what she was doing was prayer. In fact, I believe it is the deepest kind of prayer!

The woman said she talked to Jesus as she would a friend, a very special friend. This reminded me of the passage in the Gospel of John that we heard this morning. Jesus, who is approaching his last days on earth in human form, tells his disciples,

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends."

"I have called you friends." This is one of the most profound and deeply meaningful teachings of Jesus. It shapes not only our relationship with Jesus, but also our relationship with God.

I reminded the woman that in the seventeenth century, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, a Carmelite monk, developed a spiritual discipline that he called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Though he was not an educated man, Brother Lawrence became a spiritual giant solely through the practice of this spiritual discipline. The practice is actually quite simple. It is something all of us can do. Brother Lawrence encouraged us to be in constant conversation with God or Jesus. He maintained that this is really the only spiritual discipline and the only type of prayer that we need to practice.

This is because the heart of our Christian faith is not what we *believe about* God and Jesus. Faith is more of a *relationship* than a belief system. Our faith journey as Christians is the process of deepening our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It begins with our awareness of God's presence within us. Our conversation with this spiritual center, this presence, shapes and deepens our soul. As we open our heart and our mind to God, as we both talk with God and listen, we allow God to create us. Then, through us, God creates a new world.

I believe it's that simple. I don't know how it became so complicated that a deeply religious person like that woman could feel that what she was doing was not prayer. Actually, I think I do. It is grounded in the contrast between the passage of scripture we just heard and the

other passage we read this morning, the one from the Gospel of Matthew. It speaks to the difference between a Jesus who is our friend and a Jesus who is an object of worship.

In the passage near the end of Matthew, Mary has just been encountered by the angel at the tomb. The angel tells Mary that Jesus is not in the tomb; he has been raised from the dead. He tells her to tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead to Galilee, where they will see him. Mary and the other women leave the tomb in fear and great joy and run to tell the disciples what they have experienced, what they have learned. Then we read,

Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him.

They fell down at his feet and worshipped him. While I understand the impulse to worship our risen Lord, I am concerned that making Jesus an object of worship creates a distance. I find no evidence that Jesus wanted people to worship him. He continually pointed past himself to God and to the kingdom of God. The kind of distance that accompanies formal worship shapes our understanding of prayer. It leads us to believe that prayer needs to be formal, that it can only take place in certain "sanctified" places at a special time of the week, that it involves the use of certain religious words, or that it should be accompanied by gestures like kneeling or raising our hands. I think this way of thinking undermines the true meaning of the Resurrection and the affirmation that our Lord lives—in the world and also within us!

I was deeply touched by my conversation with the woman last Sunday. Although we come from two different religious backgrounds, we discovered we saw eye to eye on practically everything! I just hope I was able to convince her that her informal conversations with God and with Jesus are prayer in the deepest sense of the term.

I guess, in the end, it really doesn't matter if she calls it prayer or not. As long as she continues doing exactly what she is already doing, she is all set.

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