

Peter Bankson: Prayer: A Radical Response to Life

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

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Prayer: A Radical Response to Life

Introduction

In our Epistle lesson for this week, Paul says:

I am grateful to God – whom I worship with a clear conscience as my ancestors did – when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

“I am grateful to God ... when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.” Do you ever wonder what Paul meant when he wrote that? Was it a cheap, throwaway exaggeration, meant to give Timothy a warm feeling that Paul was praying for him?

Keep Praying

Paul was writing to his associate Timothy from prison, so he may have had time to pray constantly. Nevertheless, Paul did not learn how to pray while he was in jail. He had been a tentmaker, so maybe he had learned to pray while he sewed, stitching his care into the seams that would hold rough fabric into the homes of a wandering people. Maybe Brother Laurence, who was always reciting prayers as he washed dishes in the monastery kitchen, modeled his prayer life on the working life of Paul.

Maybe this kind of prayer that Paul refers to is more than just words and pictures in my imagination.

About six months ago, I started closing e-mail messages with the encouragement to “keep praying ...” At the time, we were heading into a renewed search for a contractor to help us with the renovation of our new headquarters on Carroll Street. It was a time of worry and wonder, and it just seemed like a good thing – to encourage ourselves to ... “keep praying.”

As I kept writing those words, I began to ask myself, what I mean by “Keep Praying?” The truth is, I did not really know. When I started typing that phrase every day, it was an effort to remind us – myself included – that our little piece of life is intricately linked and inexorably linked with the wonder of God's creation. Our impending move to Carroll Street, our desire to welcome all who come, our commitment to honor and include children and adults of all ages, our search for deeper relationships with God, our support for justice and deep ecology, our exuberance and our internal friction ... **all** of this life is part of something larger, part of God's unfolding creation.

“Keep Praying” was a cry from somewhere deep inside me that we hold each other gently, lovingly, even as we push at the sides of that fragile earthen vessel that is our life together.

Then, as sometimes happens for me, I started to live with an old book. This time it was "On Becoming a Musical, Mystical Bear: Spirituality American Style" by Matthew Fox. He wrote it in 1976. I tried to read it then, stopped reading long before he stopped writing. It is not an easy read.

This time, I found in it a structure to think about prayer. Fox makes the case that prayer, authentic prayer, is a "radical response to life." By that, he means that prayer for our time needs to have two dimensions: it needs to be deeply rooted in the mystery of life; and it needs to be uprooting injustice in the world. Both of these, the wonder and the work, Fox argues, are essential for authentic prayer.

Truth is Rooted in the Mystery

First, we must celebrate the mystery of life, beginning with life itself. This is at the heart of our inner journey in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour. Traditionally, we commit to spending time each day reading the Bible and other spiritual works, and reflecting on the mystery of creation – life and death, the marvel of the seasons, the joy and pain of relationships, good and evil.

Last weekend I was with many of you on silent retreat at Dayspring. It was an extended time for reading and reflection, for walks to the Lake of the Saints, for time alone and time together in barely silent laughter around the table. By mid-morning on Saturday, I was not working or worrying ... just letting Creation smile on me through a warm fall day. It was Sabbath: it was the beginning of prayer.

There are many ways to root ourselves in the mystery of life. Many of us walk the same path outdoors frequently. I'm noticing how the sunrise is slipping later every day, and how the morning sounds are changing as the birds that spent the summer in Canada are passing through on their way south for the winter. They will fly thousands of miles each way, and

return to the same neighborhoods next summer.

Tomorrow Mollie is leaving for a vision quest that includes a four-day fast alone in the mountains. She will be seeing new things with eyes brightened by her hunger. Alan is keeping a journal, writing down his thoughts as he goes through his daily round of radiation therapy, listening for the poetry of life, and recognizing that each day brings a blessing. Truth is rooted in the mystery.

Matthew Fox suggests that there are three elements to this part of prayer: opening our awareness to the Mystery, freedom from the oughts and musts imposed by our culture and appreciation and savoring of God's Creation.

That looks to me like receiving God's gifts and letting them sink from awareness into appreciation. I heard that in our prayers of praise and thanksgiving this morning.

Justice requires uprooting the Culture

Prayer is more than appreciation and savoring. Matthew Fox describes the second element as "uprooting the culture." He calls it "prophecy." This is faith, at work. In the tradition of the Church of the Saviour this is the outer journey, a commitment to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and change the systems that perpetuate discrimination, oppression and injustice.

I heard that in David Lloyd's commitment to the victims of the terrorist attack on the Pentagon. I have watched us search, as a community, for ways to call for justice with mercy, to reach out to those among us who are in pain.

Fred Taylor used to remind us "if we keep doing what we've been doing, we'll keep getting what we've been getting – and that's not good enough." Fred has been out there, crying for justice for kids, crying in what often seems like a wilderness.

Many Seekers are working hard for justice in lots of different places. Nevertheless, I believe we are called to more.

Yesterday I spent the morning at Carroll Street with a lot of you. We were doing liturgy ... the work of the people. We were tearing down walls. It was exhilarating to watch as the walls came down, and the space opened up. I watched Andrew Holmes in a hard hat, armed with a six-pound maul, carefully pounding the plasterboard off the walls, and thought of how he will feel when he brings his high-school friends to Seekers for a weekend "in-town" workshop on overcoming homelessness, or protecting the environment.

A colleague of mine at Communities in Schools has a poster in his cubicle that says, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why they have no food, they call me a Communist."

Matthew Fox offers these signs of a true prophet – a personal uprooting, a reluctance to act, creativity in the face of life, a community orientation, and a willingness to bear the pain of the death of the old. As I read that, I thought of Sandra Miller, moving here from Oakland to be with us. So many of us are in the midst of a personal uprooting, and would rather not face all that unknown right in front of us. Nevertheless, we are, and that is part of our prayer.

That is not always as easy as it sounds. We have suffered a lot of pain, and our sense of trust is fragile. That is true of the nation, and this city, and our little congregation ... this fragile earthen vessel.

Out of respect for those who are carrying it, I will not offer examples of the pain among us, but it is real, and it cuts down on our willingness to trust each other. It puts up a wall between our sense of call to uproot injustice and our ability to do that together as a community.

In the monthly gathering of the spiritual directors last

Thursday evening, we talked about how the terrorist attacks have affected us. I got two interesting things out of that conversation. First, the pain, fear and anger that were triggered by the attack on September 11th have been squirting out in other places of pain and fear and anger. Sometimes that makes responses to small things much bigger than you might expect. That is not too surprising in the abstract, but it was a big surprise when I found myself doing it – at work, and here in the community.

The other thing we noticed was that in the aftermath of the attacks, when all that emotion comes out in big chunks, the issues that carry it are real issues. I have had some hard conversations lately, but there is, inside me, a growing sense that healing has begun. One little sign of that came on Thursday afternoon. My heart leaped up when I heard the announcement that the Bush Administration had released \$320 Million in aid for the Afghan people, and that one part of the plan is to airdrop food to them! I thought, “That’s what Marjory said we should do [in her sermon](#) on the Sunday after the attacks! More things are wrought through prayer than this world dreams of...”

The Need for Discernment

If prayer really **were** a radical response to life, what would it look like for us to be a prayerful community ... for me to “keep praying?”

I will offer two ways to think about that.

Matthew Fox argues that prayer is a radical response to life. That means that we must be rooted in the mystery of Creation and uprooting injustice in the culture around us. Becoming rooted in mystery demands awareness, appreciation and savoring of God’s Mystery, with freedom to let go of old patterns. Uprooting injustice looks like call: it begins with a personal uprooting, it is met with initial reluctance but it draws

forth our creativity within community as we bear the pain of the death of the old.

That was clear to me after I had read it three times, but not so clear after I had written it down. I was struggling to find a simpler way to describe it as I got to Carroll Street for the work party yesterday morning. As I got out of my car, a white butterfly flew across the back of the lot – one last salute to summer.

As I watched it move in its elegant, bumpy, butterfly way, I saw another image of what it means to “keep praying.” Try this:

Authentic prayer has the same three elements as the life of a butterfly.

First, you need to receive from Creation. Like a caterpillar. Eat, grow, eat, grow. This is how the butterfly becomes rooted in the Mystery of God.

Then you must reflect on Creation. Like a pupa. Withdraw from the culture. Spin a cocoon. Go on silent retreat. Let the mystery unfold within you.

Then – and only then – you must respond to Creation. Like a butterfly. Draw attention to the hidden blossom. Change the system. Break down the walls that separate us. Pollinate the ragweed. This is how the butterfly uproots the culture.

In either case, authentic prayer is a continuing mix of appreciation, reflection and action. God calls us, and we receive, reflect and respond. We are tearing down the walls.

Keep praying!

Amen