

*How do you understand prayer?*

When I was young, I was taught to say my prayers; maybe you were too. At night, it was “Now I lay me, down to sleep...; Before meals — “Come Lord Jesus, be our guest” and After meals — “We thank you, Lord...” There were a lot of words, and I recited them dutifully. But sometimes I messed up. In fact, I distinctly remember the time that the words snowballed on me. I skipped my prayers a few nights and assumed I had to make them up before I could go to sleep the next night. This got harder and harder until I was up to thirty seven recitations. On the thirty-eighth night I recall lying in bed crying and saying “Jesus, I just can’t do it.” And by some grace of God, a little voice from within said something like, “It’s okay. Just say one.” I did — and then fell into a blessed sleep.

In the years since, I have thought a great deal about my early understanding of prayer. Our recitations and spoken words are useful and powerful. Often, we use them to communicate our needs and desires to God; and in our communal liturgies to solidify our connection to God as well as to one another. And yet as a child, what turned out to be most important to me were not the words that I said (or did not say) but rather, the fact that God was there, and was reaching out to me. All I had to do was to silence my own voice long enough to notice the voice of this friend who was there waiting to offer me rest and peace.

Somehow in that moment of God’s reaching, I learned that I had not just a sounding board but rather, a relationship with a most personal friend who actually loves and cares for me; and who desires my love in return. The great 4th century bishop, St. Augustine, refers to prayer, this relationship we each have with God, as the place “where Christ comes to meet every human being;” the well where we come seeking water only to find that Christ is already there:

“It is he [Christ] who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God’s desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him.”

God thirsts for me, and for you! In every moment of our lives, there is Jesus, beckoning to us. There he is at the well and there he is on the cross. In his everyday travels and even in his hour of greatest agony, he cries out, “I thirst!” In these days of so much uncertainty and especially during my darkest moments, I find this fact, that God longs to be in relationship with me; even to the point of thirsting for and waiting for me, to be deeply comforting. What a gift to have a God who desires us just as we are, and who is already out in front; a God who knows our needs and who, *even when we do not know how to pray as we ought, intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8: 26)*.

There is a Hasidic saying of uncertain origin which conveys an idea that has become somewhat prevalent in both Jewish and Christian circles. It provides another image of our close and thirsting God; this friend who desires and waits on each one of us; and whose life-giving water is able to seep in through the many cracks of our lives:

“God sits on top of our heart. When we desire to pray, the heart cracks open and God tumbles down inside.”

*Where might there be cracks in your own heart? How is God waiting to tumble down inside you?*

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