

A Meditation upon the Prayers of the People

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Proper 29 A, Matthew 25:31-46

I think I'd better make one or two comments on that cheery and uplifting gospel before talking a bit about the Prayers of the People. The two aren't unrelated, because what this gospel is saying, despite the fact that it isn't politically correct about goats, is that God doesn't act arbitrarily toward us. God's judgment is not arbitrarily changing a person's condition, but God allowing what one has become in reality to become apparent. That isolation which good Christian theology has always understood to be the core of hell is only the kind of isolation one has been in the process of creating if one doesn't minister to others. But prayer is the opposite of hell because to pray is to connect and to pray for the whole of creation as we seek to do in the Prayers of the People is to seek a universal connection which is the opposite of a universal isolation.

In my judgment it's highly unfortunate that the imagery of brimstone has been so successful in impressing itself on western civilization. It has encouraged people to believe that divine judgment is a matter of punishment and not a matter of what kind of being one has become.

Now watch me do a piece of magic. I'm about to relate that to the prayers of the people. Hocus Pocus. You all know where hocus-pocus came from don't you?

Congregation: No.

I suspect, but don't know for sure, that it's a piece of late medieval anti-clerical satire, based on the Latin words said at the consecration during the Eucharist: "Hoc est corpus meum." "This is my body, Hoc est corpus meum." The satire is that there were all these priests so ignorant of their Latin that they didn't know the right thing to say, even at the utter climax of the Eucharist, so they always said hocus-pocus. The Protestants made great hay with this during the Reformation, as you can well imagine. Well, that takes care of that.

So, what are we trying to do when we pray The Prayers of the People? Once we have been approached by God, as we are in Scripture; once we have acknowledged the centrality of God as a starting point, which we do in the creed; the next step is to expand beyond God and ourselves by asking and answering the question, "What difference does this starting point make for how we approach the rest of the world?" God seeks us, we hear and accept being sought, we seek to include the world in God's seeking. This next step, relating

the rest of the world to that starting point is, essentially, the function of The Prayers of the People.

I understand that the new Harry Potter movie is out and has a basilisk in it. If a basilisk looks you in the eye it turns you to stone. That's a characteristic I sometimes wish I possessed. Anyway I'm going to fold my arms and give this congregation a basilisk eye, for a moment, to say, "Doggone it, prayer is probably one of the most misunderstood things in the entire Christian world." Before I can talk about what prayer is supposed to be and do I have to talk about what it isn't.

There is language which suggests prayer is primarily asking God to do something which might not otherwise happen. Thus there comes to be no difference between God and Santa Claus. The function of both is to give you things. Now this is an insult even to Santa Claus. Nevertheless prayer is all too frequently thought about in that way. But the real function of prayer is to relate things to each other. We relate ourselves to God by means of prayer. We relate ourselves to each other and to the creation.

And what's deceptive about it is that every relationship we go about forming has some kind of end. People create families of one sort or another, and the creation of a family is not an accidental act, a sort of human Brownian motion. It has ends. The ends people have in relation to each other may be good, mixed or bad, but every relationship has ends. Every relationship has them. When we ask for something in prayer, what we are really doing is stating what the end of the relationship is, in so far as we see it right now. When this thing, whatever we are praying about, is related to us and to God what is the end of that relationship? Well, we pray for healing, for people who are in trouble, for the poor, for those treated unjustly. The end of the relationship that we are forming with them is that they be healed, freed, made secure, given justice. That doesn't mean that all this will happen, mind you. But the desire for, the purpose of, the relationship is that they happen. That's why we pray for their healing. That is the end, the desired result of our relating the person to God. And we think that the end we desire is the purpose of the relationship, but it is not so. The true purpose of prayer is that love be expressed - - and praying alone does that whether or not the ends prayed for be achieved.

Now the odd thing about relationships, of any depth or complexity, is that they are full of serendipity. All kinds of things happen in them that we neither plan for nor expect. And when we start relating things to God by praying about them, that same thing happens. What happens when we pray for someone may not be at all what we expect. But, as in ordinary relationships, if the relation is neither created nor practiced in the first place there is no room or foundation within which or upon which serendipity can act. And so prayer is a necessary part of the Christian life, even if it doesn't lead to the specific end we name in prayer, because its main function is to build a relationship within which other things, even things we don't expect and don't plan for, can happen.

In Eucharist we've heard God address us by means of scripture, we respond to that by using the creed to say, "Yes, that is the starting place." But if it is the starting place for us, in order to continue along that path we need to

relate the rest of the world and our concerns for it to that starting place. That's the function of The Prayers of the People. In other words, OK, if God is good enough for us then God is good enough for everything else too. So let's, in a symbolic shorthand way at least, start that process of creating some kind of unity of the creation around our beginning point with God. That's why we pray for things to happen, for people to be healed, for people to grow, for love to be expressed.

Our praying does not mean those ends are permanently fixed in place or etched in stone. As we learn more about each other one hopes we learn more about how to help each other grow. That may mean that we will seek, this year, a different kind of Christmas present for each other than we sought ten years ago. Same thing with prayer. The ends we seek in prayer grow as we ourselves grow.

So that's the function, I think, of the prayers of the people.

Now one more thing about prayer and the Christian life. I mention this because it constantly comes up – I almost would say everlastingly comes up – in my conversations with people about how they are doing with God. I do occasionally get into a conversation about that. There is a belief that when one begins to get seriously involved in religion of some form or other that one ought to spend more time in formal prayer. Now far be it from me to discourage any of you who have a bent in that direction. But in truth I think some people are called to more traditional prayer and some aren't. It depends on who you are and how your religious life develops. Like most other things which aren't moral obligations, formal prayer is a gift and some people have more capacity for it than others in the same way that some people have correct musical pitch and other don't. Some people have to work harder to develop prayer skills than other people. Well, if it's not your gift, formal prayer, I don't think God expects you to spend much more time at it than the necessary minimum. And it's important to remember that formal prayer is not the final objective of the Christian life. That objective is to live so that everything we touch becomes an expression of love. In fact, the objective of the Christian life is to live so that love becomes our second nature, our unconscious standard of measurement, the universal object of all our actions which we seek without thinking we seek it. The practice of formal prayer has value because, for some people, it points beyond its own self-conscious nature, to a time when what one began doing by discipline, one has finally come to do by nature.

Even people who don't do much formal praying can live their lives as if they were in a constant process of relating themselves and everything they come into contact with to God. They don't even have to know that that's what they are doing to do it. I've known people, in fact, who seem very good at this kind of prayer but, alas, they want nothing to do with the churchy. They just go through their lives acting out love as if it were the most natural thing in the world. They don't even seem to spend much time thinking about it. And they certainly have no calluses on their knees. Well, are they praying? If praying is offering the world to God it certainly seems to me that's what they are doing. Are they self conscious about it? No, not at all. Do they spend much time

practicing the scales of prayer? No, not necessarily.

Now please understand that I'm not denigrating formal prayer or saying that, for most of us, it's unnecessary. What I am saying is be careful, please, not to confuse an hour of playing scales with the execution of a Mozart concerto. If one says, "I'm beginning to get serious about the religious life and therefore need to spend more time in formal prayer," there is a danger which one needs to get over of confusing the scales with the concerto. Most of us need to spend some time with the scales or the concerto doesn't come. That's what Sunday morning is about. But, after all, the test of the Christian life is not Sunday morning. If today's gospel means anything, the true test is what happens in our lives during the week. The purpose of Sunday is to give a symbolic framework within which the life of the week can be placed and then understood. But the guts of the matter, its heart and soul, are not this morning, but the rest of the week, of which this morning presents to us the meaning.

OK I think that's enough theological esoterica about The Prayers of the People. Now a few minor details about how the prayers are to be executed in worship.

First, the Prayers of the People are really the people's part of the service. Neither I nor anyone else who wears a backward collar has any business being any part of it – except, perhaps now and again, to direct traffic. In other words, clergy may, but not must, start them, finish them, keep them a bit focused. But all real content needs to come from the people. After all, this is their part of the service and they are responsible for it. It is their lives which must be related to God if the Christian vision is to be more than an unskillfully presented and amateurishly acted stage play. That's the reason we bounce the particular petitions of the prayers of the people around among the members of the congregation. It's not mine, it's yours. Now I will occasionally say a petition, because, even though I'm up here in funny clothes, I'm still a people. But in my formal role as a priest I have nothing to do with providing content for all this.

That's a very important thing to realize. These prayers are where the congregation can be as creative as they please. And in the *Didache*, a very early Christian document, there are instructions on how to conduct the prayers of the people. They are directed to the bishop, limiting his right to interfere. The instructions say that the bishop may stop the prayers of the people as long as they are merely petitionary. You can stop the process of asking for things when you think it has gone on long enough. But if the prayers are of adoration or of joy, then it doesn't make any difference how long they go on, the bishop cannot stop them. The early church understood the prayers of the people and the expression of the people's thanksgivings to be their matter. The ability of the president of the congregation to interfere with the process was strictly curtailed.

Now, sometimes you will see the word "silence," or "Silence is to be kept" between separate petitions. And that's confusing because it seems to imply that nothing whatsoever is to be said out loud except the printed prayer. After all, silence means silence. It doesn't mean talking. But if you look at the rubrics carefully they state that after each petition of those forms of the Prayers of the

People calling for silence, the congregation shall have a chance to voice their reaction to that petition. But silence means simply that there shall be some real silence, not that there never be anything but silence. So at least in this church as long as I'm here no one need understand the instruction to silence as exclusive of vocalized prayer.

Well, that's about enough on the prayers of the people. Please stand for the Creed.