

The Power of Prayer

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

March 10, 2019

Winn Collier, pastor at All Souls in Charlottesville, VA provided an interesting reflection on this passage in his recent *The Christian Century* article:

Lent provides a 40-day season when we're invited to pay attention to our hunger, to those yearnings that move us toward healing and ultimately toward Easter's feasting.

Traditionally Lent is a season of fasting, surrendering food (or certain types of food, or other things), in solidarity with Jesus' own experience and in recognition that we too crave God above all else. While Lent often invites rigorous discipline, it need not be grim. We don't need to dress in sack cloth or smear our faces with ashes. If anything, we should take better care of our bodies, hold our heads up to receive the light of God, and step out in extra acts of kindness and support of our brothers and sisters in need. With whatever practice you choose, know you are "fasting" toward joy, Easter, life, hope. We simplify. We let go of the importance of things. We go silent. But we do all this as we move in faith toward hope. We move toward God.

Look at your new practice, possibly prayer, as holy therapy. Lent is an embodied way that we receive God's healing and return to the One who is good and true. We don't spurn food or take on some practice merely to prove our spiritual fervor. We do it because we're physical people who every so often, need to use our bodies to pay attention to God, to be renewed in God. Our hunger pangs, or our new learning practice, reminds us of our truest hunger, prodding us toward what our soul craves most. Lent reminds us that we desire God, that we need God, if we are to truly live.

If you should happen to choose a deeper prayer life, to strengthen your understanding and participation of a walk with Jesus, I applaud that commitment! I was very surprised, though, in the recent discovery of an intriguing book: *Never Pray Again*. But the subtitle helps a lot: *Lift Your Head, Unfold your Hands, and Get to Work!* It was written by 3 young seminary graduates who were just beginning their ministry. Their commitment to a life of prayer is strong, and also engaging with the people around them. But it is not a private act that any one of the three uses to escape from the world, it is a drive to understand God and then to put their practice to work. Here was an interesting discover for me:

Self-knowledge, in the way we usually mean it, does not seem to have been a preoccupation among the various biblical peoples. Navel-gazing is pretty much absent from the stories of Abraham, Moses, Esther, and the Prophets. With Jesus, though, we see what seems like a concern for self-knowledge. In the synoptic gospels we have a Jesus who immediately after he is baptized goes out into the wilderness to be tested. In Jesus' wilderness testing, he learns more about himself and we learn more about him.

Will he use his divine power and status to relieve his discomfort and hunger? NO!

Will he claim rulership over the world in a demonic fashion, choosing power over others from on high if it is offered? NO!

Will he call upon the heavenly host to rescue him from danger or harm? NO!

We can never know what Jesus' ministry would have been like if he had never had this testing early on, but we can assume that everything Jesus did, he felt was necessary. So, even for Jesus, it was necessary to go out into the desert, alone and without comforts, and to come face to face with his deepest temptations. Can we do less, if we are going to follow him?

The comparison with Jesus will of course not be flattering. Most of us have not been hungry for four days, much less forty days - who knows what we'd do to get some food at that point? And who hasn't begged God to save them from danger, or hasn't salivated at the opportunity to be put in charge of everything for once?

But the principle stands: before we go out into the world, making proclamations and trying to make things right, we need to understand ourselves as deeply as we can.

I seek strength, not to be greater than my brother, but to fight my greatest enemy - myself. Make me always ready to come to you with clean hands and straight eyes. So when life fades, as the fading sunset, my Spirit may come to you without shame.

Black Elk Holy Man, Oglala Sioux

I close with a prayer offered by a Master of Divinity student at San Francisco Seminary:

Divine Mutuality: Psalm 51 for Today
Alysha Laperche. SFTS MDiv Student

Hold my hand, God,
And in Your humility,
Make yourself known to me.
You re-make me from the inside-out.
You are powerful in Steadfast Love,
You level the ground with Your mercy
And You open the table with grace.
Hold my hand as I walk with You.
Transform me, and let me transform.
Speak to me, and let me speak.
Love me lavishly, and I shall let loose love.
Shelter me, and I will be a shelter for the shattered and vulnerable –
Those close to Your heart.
Wrap me up in Your whole being;
Your presence is the touchstone for my healing.