

Prayer

Studies: In Prayer

Reference: Prayer and the Living Christ, Flora Slosson Wuellner, 1969.

Title: Prayer and Action

Text: Luke 10:38-42

Mary and Martha -- a most misunderstood story. Most people are familiar with the story in the tenth chapter of Luke about the two sisters of Lazarus who were hostesses to Jesus on more than one occasion. Mary, at this particular time, sat at Jesus' feet to listen to him. Martha chose to rush around the kitchen, cooking an elaborate meal. Jesus mildly reproved Martha who was trying to get Mary back into the kitchen, telling her that Mary had made the better choice.

Generally it is assumed that Martha was the complete activist, always organizing, always efficiently at work, and that Mary by nature was the dreamer, the spiritual one, the one who sat around imitating the lilies of the field and developing the "higher" side of life.

For all we know it may well have been Martha who was the dreamy, the inefficient one, who got all upset when left alone to get a meal on the table. Perhaps, it was Mary who was the natural efficient organizer and leader in the home, who knew when to stop organizing and sit down and listen. She may have been the best cook and housekeeper in Bethany.

To be sure, we can not tell at this distance. But unfortunately the image continues in the church down to the present day. Most people still assume that the praying, ~~contemplating~~ meditating Christian is the dreamer, the vague gentle one, the one who can't be trusted to be efficient whether working in the kitchen or on the Every Member Canvass. | They are the Marys of the church. Let them talk and pray. They can at least inspire the rest of us.

But then there are the Marthas, so goes the myth. The doers of the word. They are much too busy to pray. Let them run the church and the practical affairs of a Christian life. After all, they are carrying out what the Marys are praying about, aren't they?

There is a little story told by Albert E. Day's in his book, Autobiography of Prayer. "In a lifeboat adrift at sea, one great big strong fellow frightened by their situation cried out that he was going to pray. A hard-boiled seaman shouted: 'Let the little fellow pray. You stick to the oars!'"

How true this is. And I believe we understand this reaction because it is usually our own. In fact, in present-day "religionless Christianity" the so-called praying type of Christian has sunk even lower in the scale and lost whatever doubtful usefulness he had. ^W ^{assume} ~~It~~ now appears that the fellow at the oars, worn out and scared silly, is the one who is really praying because he is so actively involved in the situation. Martha, it seems, is the sister who is really thinking about Christ. After all, isn't she the one who is realistically relating to other people's needs?

This is often heard from our church pulpits. The theory is that "to work is to pray." One author expresses it this way: "We do not discover God in prayer and ~~thereafter~~ ^{on the other hand} take him with us into our daily work.... It is in the daily work that he reveals himself and gives himself to us. We pray most really when we live most deeply."

Bishop John Robinson writes in a similar vein: "My own experience is that I am really praying for people,....precisely as I meet them and really give my soul to them....Prayer is the responsibility to meet others with all I have."

One hesitates to attack this point of view, because one would seem to imply that he underestimates loving involvement with others. But ~~if~~ I should like to point out that there is more than one way of being lovingly involved.

What do you think Jesus was doing when he withdrew from the crowds for a night of solitary prayer? Why didn't he stay right down there with the hungry, sick multitude, and heal them? The usual answer is that he was tired. Jesus needed a time of retreat to be inspired again, so ^{he} could go on the next day. The implication seems to be that it is a pity that such retreats are necessary. How much better it would be if we were all so made that we could stay on the job with no rest. With this view in mind, the experience of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration seems to be justified because it gave him the energy to go down the mountain and heal the epileptic boy. I wonder how many sermons and Bible studies have been preached on that theme.

"Now don't think you can spend much time in selfish contemplation," we are told in essence. "Don't get lost in prayer (as if there were any danger of that with any of us). Remember there are people who need you. Faith without works is dead, you know. Get off that mountain top as soon as you can and get to work. After all, work is the best kind of prayer."

But there is another explanation for Jesus on the mountain top. The explanation of work. It was real work. His body might have been still. He was not talking to anyone or putting his hands on anyone. He was alone during most of the nights of prayer. Because of this, we assume that this prayer life of Jesus was a private feast between himself and God, with all the sin of the world forgotten. I do not believe this was the case. It would probably be more than likely that those hours of private prayer resulted in a powerful work of healing and reconciliation. Probably more powerful than his good deeds. You see, as Jesus gave himself to the Father through surrendered prayer, he was at that moment releasing the power of God into the suffering world. Of course, this power of God would be demonstrated the next day as he moved among the people.

But it would be at work also, that night, in hidden powerful ways over the whole earth.

I believe prayer is work. What actually are we doing when we pray? We are moving into the very heart of the Power which controls all power. Who is this God we contact through prayer? The Bible describes God in many ways, and all the descriptions imply overwhelming energy: fire, wind, warrior, king, bridegroom. For example, God's kingdom is described by Jesus in terms of growth and power: yeast, seed, fermenting wine, vineyards and trees, advancing armies, Therefore, when we touch this God through prayer can we possibly remain the same ?

What is the praying man doing? Dr. Gerald Heard writes, "HE feeds new energy into the life stream itself. He has touched the mainspring.....We are attaining to the growing power, freedom and creativeness of God, himself."

I believe this is true through prayer in Christ. On our own, by our own efforts, we know that our ability to communicate deeply with the Father is far from perfect. But, when we relate to God through his Son who was completely surrendered, we are relating ourselves to that surrender. ~~You see, our ability to be channels of God's love into the world is immeasurably increased.~~ *Then we become*

The men and women who have been the most mature and experienced in prayer have not been people unaware of the problems of the world. The people who have been granted in prayer have always been people found in all walks of life: the professor, the teacher, a housewife, the business man. Their lives are overflowing with action *actioners* and responsibility. They have very little spare time. But their action flows from a center of poise and authority which is not their own but comes from almighty God. They don't give the appearance of "pious" people, and they don't even talk very much about prayer unless asked. But ~~they~~ *actioners* are very human; ~~and~~ *but* they know that they are not acting alone.

And by that act of commitment Christ's risen energy ~~is~~ is poured into the situation. And I believe by our acts of surrendered prayer the world is a little better place to live. Sometimes we will see the results almost immediately. Sometimes we won't see them for a long time if at all. But we will know with increasing assurance that God has used our prayer as a means to help the world or some individual life in some way that it needed helping.

Once, in church, I saw a woman sitting in the congregation. Her face looked tired and tense. I didn't know what her problem was, but I found myself praying that the light of Christ would surround her and that his peace that passes understanding would come to her. After the service she told me quietly, "I was so upset when I came to the service today. It's a rather complicated problem and I can't explain it all now, but during the service I found myself thinking of the peace of God. And it became real to me. I do feel peaceful now." We had not talked together. She did not know of my prayer for her. But God was able to take the offered love and trust in his power and do with it some important work in her heart.

Now, I do not always see the answer to my prayers as fast as this. But I hope it illustrates the attitude of Surrendered prayer. Through my study of prayer, I believe I have learned one truth -- and if nothing else comes across tonight I hope this truth will: if prayer is the strength of the Christian, Christ is the strength of prayer. Prayer undertaken by our own unaided, well-meaning efforts usually becomes only one more source of strain in a life already too full of tensions.

The prayer with which the first Christians embraced the suffering world was prayer infused with power generated beyond the human dimension. Perhaps I should not use that unpopular word "supernatural," but I would like to make it clear that the prayer which changes lives does not arise from the context of our five senses and the three dimensions. The power which is the living Christ meets our life at its depths. It streams from the Christ who was not merely incarnated but is also risen. He lived - yes. But he also lives. And he lives in power. On this central fact is grounded, I believe, the uniqueness which is Christian prayer.

~~How does prayer work?~~

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