

Spiritual Practice II: Prayer

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Luke 18: 9 - 14, Romans 8:26-7

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 15, 2010



A couple of weeks ago, we started on a short series about spiritual practice. The first sermon had to do with the reasons why spiritual practice, spiritual growth is important - moving from childhood to adulthood - not just becoming better people, but becoming new people.

This week, we are going to talk about prayer - not the different kinds of prayer, or whether or not prayer is effective, or whether there is a right way and a wrong way to pray. This meditation is on the nature of prayer itself.

John Calvin thought that prayer was at the very heart of the Christian's life. He wrote more about prayer than he wrote about almost anything. The first and foremost reason that he believed we must pray is so "that our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love and serve God." (In *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers*, Howard Rice, Westminster/John Knox: Louisville, KY, 1991, p. 75) Karl Barth says, "Prayer must be an act of affection...for God asks the allegiance of our hearts." Without that, he says, prayer is merely form and nothing else, no matter how correctly done. (Ibid., p. 85)

Prayer, then, is about the conditions of our hearts.

And I believe we can go on to say that "it is not the content of the heart that matters," it is only our ability to speak from the heart that matters. (James P. Carse, *The Silence of God: Meditations on Prayer*, Harper Collins: NY, 1995, p. 2)

So, now let us prepare our hearts to listen for the word of God....

Please, sit back for a few minutes and relax. Because I am going to read to you a bit this morning. I am going to read the first few paragraphs from a book that I dipped into when I was on my vacation last week in one of the most beautiful places I know - Northwestern Montana - near Glacier Park. It is a place of mountains, crystal lakes lashed by an orange setting sun, domed and expansive skies of blue and black, and towering pines and diminutive, dancing, darling wildflowers, birds that soar and paddle and laugh, fish that glide and leap. God's creation in unmasked, unbridled, unbelievable profusion.

The book I want to read from is called, *Going to the Sun: A Remembrance of Life in Glacier Park*. It is an autobiography written by James Webster Sherwood. James, or Jaz as he is called now, grew up in Apgar Village in Glacier Park. His house had a name - Sherwood Lodge. This beloved home, owned by his family for generations, was, in his lifetime, wrenched away by way of various serial marriages and legal means. Essentially, this is the story of Jaz's heart and his home - because, as we like to say, home is where the heart is, right?

And the book starts with a prayer. It is a painful story - but funny and poignant and very, very real. Where it ends, I don't know, because I haven't finished it yet.

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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But I did meet the author - which is another story that I'll tell more about later.... In the meantime - here's there first part of the story...

We lived in the land of promise in the age of hope praying for a miracle and, by God, it came! There was goodness gracious in bad guys and golly darn in good folks. Everyone was looking to get off easily when the least important learned they had to face the music; pay the piper even if they'd missed the dance. That's when, for heaven's sake, hell was paid for sure. The only ones who could fork over were those with nothing left. They did, to the bottom of their souls even from the bottom of the barrel - so a good time was had by all! It was then. It was now. It'll probably be forever.

On Friday, July 17, 2009, from 5 to 7 pm, an unveiling of the 4-by-6-foot oil painting of Sherwood Lodge by artist O.C. Seltzer, done about 1922, his greatest and only large work, regarded by critics for its beauty, was held at its new permanent home, the Crown of the Continent Gallery in the Hockaday Museum of Art in Kalispell, Montana, the Flathead County seat. The oil is renowned as a western masterpiece - and the only one of its kind - crammed with a drove of ghosts.

Making the dedication on behalf of the so called sole owner, the Lucille S. Fuller Trust, were her son, Dr. Rodney Skinner, and her daughter, Mrs. Sabatha Sterlingbone. As its proprietor, Dr. Skinner was expected to give a few words about the painting and about the real Sherwood Lodge, which he occupied.

There were three other guests uninvited to the crowded event enjoyed by the elite and leading citizens of the Flathead community. They were guests of [two of the] museum patrons. When they signed in, there was a flurry of activity around the museum, drawing its leaders, Mrs. Tabby Ivy, president, and Mrs. Lucy Smith, executive director, to the names of the three uninvited guests.

They were greeted with surprise and pleasure by the museum staff. They were seen with surprise and shock by the Skinner and Sterlingbone families.

"Did you invite them?"

"Not I. Did you?"

"Not on your life."

The Skinner and Sterlingbone families were alone in donating the painting valued at one million dollars and in occupying Sherwood Lodge. They had not indicated that any of the original Sherwoods were living or could be reached to attend.

But Jaz and Karyn Sherwood and their son, James Webster Sherwood IV, were there. They were besieged with questions and courtesies from the museum officials as word spread, "We thought the Sherwoods were all dead!"

"News of our death is a stretch," said James IV.

Dr. Skinner coughed and smiled and spoke privately to Jaz. "I'm really embarrassed about this. You know so much more about the painting and Sherwood Lodge. If you'd care to speak -"

"Not on your life," said Jaz.

Dr. Skinner then asked, "What's in this name 'Jaz'? I've always known you as 'Jimmy'"

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Jaz replied, "There are too many Jims. I'm tired of being called Jimmy, son of Jim, cousin and nephews of Jims.... Jas is the legal abbreviation of James.... But I'll always know you as Dr. Rod - the man who changed the locks and told the Sherwoods that they were not members of the family and no longer welcome at their home - Sherwood Lodge."

"Then why are you here?" asked Dr. Rod.

"We are not dead," Jaz said. "That above all is evident. We most surely are not dead."

Dr. Skinner made the dedicatory remarks with a cough and all the comfort and grace he could summon, looking often at Jaz. What followed were many questions about the painting which no one but Jaz could answer.

"...The dog in the picture was named Bingo," [Jaz said.] "The wonderful orange and striped horse blanket on the porch was my Uncle Marny Sherwood's and then mine as a young horseman. It hung in our breakfast room throughout my childhood. The painting hung in our living room in Hillsborough, California, where I wintered as a child. It is the portrait of my heart." (Opus Books: Plandome, NY, 2010, pp. 11-13.)

"It is the portrait of my heart."

If the heart is the home of our prayers - if we must pray from the heart to have, as Calvin says, a heart burning for God - how do we get there?

When I read Jaz Sherwood's introduction to his life's story - the story that is reflected in the staggering beauty of the painting of his home - for it is a magical painting - I couldn't help but hear echoes of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Surely the people in the parable reflect the fact that there is - as he says somewhat provincially - "goodness gracious in the bad guys and golly darn in the good folks."

I love to try and figure out the parables. They truly are an art form. They are artistic because they are timeless - what was meant is no different from what it means. They are also art because they are intentionally and skilfully crafted from the very grist and grind of every day life. As one author put it, "they are crafted out of the raw material of human life by a creative imagination." (Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* combined edition, Wm. B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1983, p. 18)

As art, they are also very free to be interpreted by those who encounter them. They are an invitation to explore and play and fiddle with the word. This is much like the invitation that Ron and Miriam Pederson extend with their art which is a collaboration of sculpture and poetry. And once they placed it out there in the Gathering Place, it is their hope that we will continue that collaboration - to let their art enter our hearts, our worlds, and create something new in us and among us.

I think art is so powerful because it offers us new patterns of expectation. It creates new worlds for us to imagine. It can strip away the facade of the world, laying bare the truth. And the truth that I'm talking about is the truth that as solid and as ordered and as reassuring as the world may feel - it is still not necessary. It is still only a possible world - and there are other possibilities. And I don't mean this in the abstract sense - but in a very real sense. Let's take money, for example.

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Money only works because of a huge and complicated network of systems and agreements that we have all decided to be a part of. Bits of metal and paper only become money when we all agree to it, right? And none of this can be forced. We can only ask for things in exchange for our money. And we can only receive what is offered in exchange. We cannot force someone to accept our money as exchange for goods and services any more than we can force someone to love us. However, this agreement has become such a part and parcel of our world that it feels like it is necessary - it is essential. But a poem, a parable, a painting can strip all this bare and get to the heart of the matter. Art can remind us that the power is not in the paper and metal. The power is in the way we are interconnected and continually asking for what we want and graciously receiving what is offered in exchange.

We also know that the power can reside in the way we use the money, too. For we can not only be gracious about it - we can abuse it, right?

Listen to this poem written by Rainer Marie Rilke. It is a fragment from a longer poem called the *Book of Pilgrimage*, and he notes that he is writing about a time, in the 14th century when "money was still gold, a beautiful thing." (Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language and Thought*, Harper Colophon Edition: NY, 1973, pp. 113-4.)

The kings of the world are grown old,
inheritors they shall have none.
In childhood death removes the son,
their daughters pale have given, each one,
sick crowns to the powers to hold.

Into coin the rabble breaks them,
today's lord of the world takes them,
stretches them into machines in his fire,
grumbling, they serve his every desire;
but happiness still forsakes them.

The ore is homesick. And it yearns
to leave the coin and leave the wheel
that teach it to lead a life inane.
The factories and tills it spurns;
from petty forms it will uncongeal,
return to mountains open vein,
and on it the mountain will close again.

This poem strips away the facade from our gracious and convenient agreement about money, and reminds us that there is a way in which we fool ourselves - make an idol, perhaps, of the bits of metal that can be stretched and twisted into everything from nail clippers to weapons of mass destruction. It brings to light that we would do well to remember that empires and kings will fall and we can lose ourselves in unconditional, rampant production and trade. Rilke's poem reminds us that our human nature, the world we have brought into being, was, in the beginning, mined from nature itself. We would do well to remember that it is a mistake to think that by our endless self-assertion in this way - this endless mining of nature and stretching of those resources through production and trade - we could actually make life in fullness for everyone. (Ibid., p.

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115.) We can no more do this than the Pharisee or the tax collector could justify themselves to God.

Which brings us back to our parable about the two men praying in the temple.

We can't really see it the way it is scripted out in our Bibles. But those who like to line these stories out and dissect their form say that this one is in the form of a song. These songs are called a parabolic ballad. The forms are ancient and were used to teach stories in the Near East. They are made up of seven stanzas with two or three lines in each stanza. They are generally lined out in an arc with the conflict in the middle stanza and the resolution in the seventh. (Bailey, p. 72.) Many familiar parables have this structure and it seems like commentators love to take up pages and pages diagramming these things out. In the end, they do look something like musical scores - not exactly Bach - but with an internal structure and simplicity all their own. In fact, I asked Helen about this and she said, "Oh it sounds to me like A, B, A plus a coda." She said all you musicians out there would know what that meant.

In a very simplified outline our parable is sung like this -

A - Two men go up to pray -

B - The Pharisee stands up and prays noting his righteousness.

B - The Tax Collector stands up and prays noting his sinfulness.

A - Two men go down - Coda - first the righteous - then the other.

And the surprise, the coda is, of course, that the despised tax collector is the one with the "goodness gracious," and is out in front. And the law abiding good guy, is the one with the "golly darn," as our friend Jaz Sherwood put it, is last.

But this is art. So there must be something a bit deeper than this. There must be something new that shows forth - something that helps us understand what it means to pray from the heart.

I mentioned earlier that I met Jaz Sherwood.

One afternoon I was looking at some things in a shop near Flathead Lake in a little town called Big Fork. My friend Barbara, who is 84 and has been going to Montana each summer for more than 40 years, was having ice cream across the street.

The owner of the shop came staggering out from a back room with a tall stack of books. I noticed that they were the book that Barbara had been reading - Jaz Sherwood's book *Going to the Sun*. A brisk and busy woman came dashing out, talking over her shoulder to the owner, who was thanking her for the fact that Jaz had just signed all the books.

I smiled and extended my hand and said, "Did your husband write that book? My friend Barbara is reading it just now and she loves it. Please be sure to let him know."

She smiled back and said, "Tell him yourself, he'll be right out."

So he came out, and I told him. And he was gracious and talkative. So I asked if he'd mind crossing the street with me to meet Barbara. I knew she'd love to meet him.

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His wife bustled over and said, "Good idea! You go along and talk with these two nice ladies, I've got some errands to run and you never keep up anyway." So Jaz joined us and we talked for about half an hour.

Barbara asked him how long it took him to write the book - it's quite long and involved. He told us a great story - as story tellers do when asked a question like that. Jaz said that it took him 40 years to write the book.

His family knew that he wanted to write the book. But the painful parts of his family history held him back.

About four years ago, his daughter called him one day and asked how the book was going. He replied, "Well, it's not. I'm afraid that if I write the book, it will kill me."

She replied, as only daughters can, "Well Dad - we're all going to die someday. **You** are going to die someday. So, go ahead - write the book."

Jaz said that after that, he realized that he had it all wrong.

Jaz said that he figured out, that **first** he had to die. **Then** he could write the book.

"So," he said, "I died, and then the book just flowed. I wasn't afraid to tell the story any more. I wasn't afraid that I would hurt those still living or open myself up to lawsuits or any of that. I died to all that anger and bitterness, all those fears, all that bad history. Finally I could tell the story with all the the dirt, all of the truth right out there in the open."

And he opened his story with that realization, saying, "We lived in the land of promise in the age of hope, praying for a miracle, and by God, it came!" The Sherwoods were there and they were not dead. Not at all.

In order to pray from the heart, we must first die.

The tax collector knows this.

He pounds on his chest. He beats himself right over his heart. Those listening to this song at the time it was written would have understood that this man had exchanged the usual posture of prayer, with arms crossed over his chest, for this gesture that is reserved for the deepest of pain. In Luke, the only other time this word is used is when people stood at the foot of the cross and beat their chests in anguish (23:48). It is brought on by death. It is brought on as an expression of being in such sorrow, that we, too, want to die. It is a sign that something in us needs to die. (Bailey, p. 153.)

And when we die, what do we receive?

I think that we receive the world.

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You know, the pieces that I chose from the Pederson's work for this sermon are a poem and sculpture called "Release." And, I've got to be honest, I chose them mostly because of the poem this time.

Miriam's poem ties together these two things for me - death and the world - beautifully. Sherrill read it for us earlier, and it's printed on the front of the bulletin.

Miriam's poem reflects for me the lovely passage from Romans. Paul says that there is way in which the mind of the Spirit prays in us - with sighs too deep for words. We have the world around us - filled with beauty - singing out with all its various rhythms - the staccato of the rain, the steady rumble of a delighted cat, the harmonica of the cricket's song. And at the end of this ballad comes the coda - the heavy human sigh - released from the depths - surrendering - letting go - the blessed letting go. Is this death? I'm not sure what Miriam had in mind. But, this is what I feel when I enter into the poem.

One of you told me about an experience your having that I think illustrates this. After years of a deep and sometimes dark struggle, you, in your head, decided that you could no longer call yourself a Christian because you did not believe in the divinity of Christ. But lately, each morning when you wake up, one of the old Baptist hymns, memorized, impressed upon you during your childhood years, is in your head. And each day, you work out the tune on your penny whistle and then carry it within your heart that day. To me this is a sign of something new coming out of death. Perhaps, your fear of voicing your doubts, or losing your identity as a Christian has died. And when there was room for another voice, God, "who searches the heart," plays the music in your head. I believe that music, is God praying in you. God has replaced the wrestling with the gentle concert, the hymnody of your heart playing softly and tenderly with your renewed and rested mind...

So often when we think of death, we think of loss.

But I think, that truly, the prayer for death is identical for the prayer for life. And this is what I mean -

When we pray to God, like the Pharisee prays, with one eye on the mirror, so to speak, we pray from the world, not from the realm of God.

We pray that somehow God will amend this world, improve it a bit, make it better, in our favor. We do not ask for life, we just ask for a different life. When we do this, I believe that we ask for far too little.

But if we were to truly pray as the tax collector prayed, pray as Jaz prayed, if we pay attention when the Spirit prays for us - from our hearts - we would find that we would pound our chests and pray for death in this way.

We must let go of the idea that death is loss. If we do not understand that death is a gift, we will always understand death as a loss. When death is understood as loss, it is though life can be

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overcome by something that is stronger. Life can become vain, a glimpse in a mirror. Or, we know, life can become filled with darkness, bitterness, anger and despair or indifference.

But if death is something offered to us as a gift and we accept it, then it ceases to be an opponent, and life ceases to be a struggle against it. Life's vanity drops away - we shed the pretense of the righteous Pharisee - and "our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love and serve God." Each moment becomes precious, each spoken word, a prayer - an opportunity for affection, each story that unfolds in our lives becomes a ballad, a poem of truth, played upon the strings of our hearts. That, my friends is prayer from the heart. That, my friends is what we receive when we are not afraid to ask for the world. Amen.

(Credit is due to James P. Carse for the last few paragraphs. Many phrases are mined from his book *The Silence of God: Meditations on Prayer*.)