

THE HARDEST WORK OF ALL

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Romans 8:26. "Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words."

The Labor Day weekend may seem like an odd time to speak of prayer. However, there is a saying attributed to Martin Luther that brings the theme of prayer and labor together. He is supposed to have said:

"Prayer is the hardest work of all."

Perhaps that does not seem very obvious. What could be easier than praying? The expenditure of energy required does not appear to be very great. People unaccustomed to prayer find it difficult to believe that there is very much to it whereas people who are very good at prayer may tell us that often their prayers come spontaneously and that they are better compared to play than to work.

On the other hand, there seem to be a great many people who think that prayer is a good idea, but who find great difficulty getting into it. And there are people who do get into it for whom at times prayer becomes a great struggle. The Gospel writers do not tell us that Jesus found carpentry hard work, or commercial fishing, or climbing up mountains or walking from one end of the Holy Land to the other. Yet they do give the impression that some of his prayers, the one in Gethsemane, for example, were very hard work indeed.

Prayer then, is not so easy. In a sense the better we are at it the more difficult prayer becomes. For when prayer is effective it grapples with the toughest issues and the most painful experiences of our lives.

There are also certain obstacles to prayer experienced by those of us who are not so good at it. It is about some of these obstacles that I plan to speak today. I am going to steer away from the intellectual ones important as they are. I am not going to try to define prayer, or to justify it or to explain how it fits into our conceptions of God and the world. I am simply going to assume that prayer is something we do, or try to do, regardless of how we interpret this activity.

It is certain practical obstacles that I shall focus on today. The first of these we might call a tendency to mental blankness. We find that at the critical moment nothing seems to be there on our minds. We are struck dumb, so to speak, in the presence of the Lord. We would like to think that this dumbness is due to reverence, but we suspect it comes from an impulse to evade the whole encounter. We don't know what to think or what to say, so we fall back on clichés that make the whole experience trivial.

One way of getting past this blankness is to make use of written or memorized prayers. They have the value of channeling our thoughts in useful directions. When our minds seem to be empty, or on the other hand, when they are too full to come to a focus, a prepared devotional guide can be of great help. We may tell ourselves contemptuously that such prepared prayers are crutches. If so, let us have the common sense to answer ourselves to the effect that there are times when we need crutches. I think, however,

that this is not a very just figure of speech. Good written prayers and devotional guides are better described as stepping stones than as crutches.

The value of written prayers lies partly in their objectivity. They don't depend on our individual moods. But this value is also their limitation. They can never become as directly personal as those prayers that come directly from ourselves. And, indeed, if we are not careful, formal prayers can become a mere mechanism, a bit of religious machinery that only serves to obscure our own thoughts.

At some point we have to address God in our own terms. The best way to begin with that is simply to permit to surface whatever lies most weightily on our minds. If our minds seem to go blank that may be because we worry too much about saying the right thing. But in prayer the right thing is always the most urgent thing about us. The essence of good praying is simply being there, being there wholly and being there sincerely with who we are.

Once again, our minds go blank because we think that when we pray we must leave the world behind and enter some sacred precinct of the soul. But that sacred precinct turns out to be rather vacant. Perhaps there is some such place where prayer may take us eventually, but the place where we need to begin is precisely our own most pressing daily concern. If we are worrying about something, then perhaps our prayer will start off as a worrying. Only it is worrying with a difference; it is worrying brought into relationship with our faith, our hope and our practice of the presence of God. If we are full of some happiness, then perhaps the prayer will begin there. But our rejoicing will take on a new dimension as it is shared with the divine Spirit.

The agenda of our prayers should be always the basic agenda of our lives. If we practice prayer on that principle we shall not lack for material.

Another obstacle we face in prayer is the tendency to impugn our own motives. This is very easy to do with respect to every sort of prayer.

If we give thanks, we may wonder whether we are being insincere.

If we confess our sins, we may accuse ourselves of being hypocritical or on the other hand, of growing morbid.

If we pray for our own needs, we may charge ourselves with selfishness

If we pray for other people's needs, we may view our prayer as meddling

If we seek the heights of mystical contemplation, we may tell ourselves that we are only trying to escape from the real world.

It is quite likely that there is some truth behind every such self-accusation. A distressing lot of bad praying goes on all the time. Jesus' parable of the pharisee and the tax collector shows us that. I suppose it is true to say that our worst sinning is that which happens in our prayers. It is a case of defiling the Holy of Holies. We do need to subject our prayers to critical examination from time to time.

Yet the habit of impugning all our motives in this way can prove self-

defeating. No doubt we do have selfish motives and misguided intentions. on the basis of that genuine celebration of God's goodness; that felt need that true compassion, that heartfelt repentance, that thirst for communion with God which is just as truly in us as our baser motives.

A third obstacle to prayer, and a very annoying one, is distraction. Distraction comes in two varieties, although sometimes both of them get together.

The first variety occurs on the outside of us. There are noises, interruptions. Jesus may have had the obstacle of distraction partly in mind when he said, "When you pray go into your room and shut the door." Even that may not work, however. For when a person goes into his room and shuts the door, the rest of the world get suspicious. They suspect that he is up to no good. After a while they find a way to get the door open.

More serious though, are the distractions inside of us. These are the seemingly extraneous thoughts that keep intruding and getting us off the track.

The spiritual disciplines of all religions are full of devices for getting rid of distractions. In order to bring focus to our prayers we westerners might do well to study the arts of concentration as they are practiced in the spiritual movements of the Far East.

Even without those esoteric arts, however, there are a number of practical things we can do.

We may begin with a bit of reading in the Bible or elsewhere that serves to fix our mind on God and the Christian message and thus to push those distracting thoughts aside.

We may pray to have the distractions taken away. Sometimes that really works!

We may learn the art of "centering down" as the Quakers say, of continually emptying our minds of everything but God's presence and of constantly calling ourselves back to him. This art takes practice. But in time it becomes less difficult.

And when everything else fails we can try something that most experienced counsellors on the devotional life find useful. Invite the distraction into the prayer. That is to say, let the distracting thought itself become the object of your prayerful attention. If it is bugging you so much, it is probably more important than you think. Why not try to look at it then in the light of God's love and God's truth. If you meet distractions head on in this way after a while they begin to lose their hold and you can move on to other things.

There are these little obstacles to prayer. And I could mention others even more serious. I doubt that we could ever surmount them were it not that prayer discloses a power other than our own that is more than equal to them. In the eighth chapter of Romans we come across the odd notion that God prays too, that he makes up for the limitations of our praying with intercessions of his own. Strange though this idea may be, I think it is

one of the most comforting thoughts in the whole Bible. And it is true to experience. For there are times when we discover that the best laid scheme of our prayers are turned aside and we are led forward by the very one we seek. It is in those moments that we come to realize that our search for God, so often confused and frustrated, is not in vain. We sense that the divine Spirit is also searching for us, climbing over obstacles in ourselves far more formidable than we admit, and meeting us where we live.