

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

24.07.2022
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Introduction

A few years ago I needed to get a new suitcase. My old one had been damaged irreparably in a flight. This was early 2020, and the pandemic was beginning, so there was no rush. Knowing I wouldn't be going anywhere quickly, I began looking for suitcases to buy. There was a particular brand whose suitcases I like, partly because they're recycled, and partly because their colours are gorgeous. I began looking at the website every few weeks, just waiting for new colours to arrive. There was no rush. I must have looked for three or four months. Nobody was going anywhere. When eventually I saw a case I liked, I bought it. It arrived. I was delighted.

But in the weeks after getting the suitcase, I kept going back to the website. It wasn't that I felt like I'd gotten the wrong one. I was happy with what I'd purchased. But I missed the looking. I missed the wanting. I missed the desire.

The lectionary reading for today contains three exhortations to pray are an invitation into a meditation on your own desire: where is it? what is it? what will you do if you get it? how can you live in its absence? how will you live in the future absence of the desire? Do you want the thing? Or do you just like wanting it? This reading, [coming right on the heels of last week's depiction of the household of Martha and Mary](#), continues the theme, although through exhortation, parable, simile and analysis, rather than through direct narrative.

As you prepare for the reading, consider: what is your relationship to desire? Do you want desires to be met quickly? Do you enjoy the ache of unmet desire? Are you ambivalent about it? Are desires complicated for you to communicate?

Text

Luke 11:1–13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Comment

What does it mean to pray? The word in English comes from French — *prier*— meaning ‘to ask’. In this week’s lectionary text, we hear three instructions on prayer: the invitation to pray the Our Father (or, depending on your denominational belonging, the Lord’s Prayer); the invitation to persistence, even if the one granting your request is irritated and irritable; the invitation to ask based on the benevolence of the one granting your request.

That the gospel of Luke records three such experiences of prayer is intriguing:

- One experience of prayer is a father, someone with a character of protection, it seems: “lead us not...”
- One is an irritable neighbour who, annoyed with his own family, will nonetheless do what’s asked to calm his own frustration.
- One is an invitation inwards to the place of asking, a place that — as Jesus has it — will be met with hospitality.

Prayer, in many situations, can be an experience of tension: there is something I am desperate for, and I am asking for it in its absence; there is a frustration that that which I do not have is not being given me, even though I’m asking someone who has it; there is a calm beneath the storm of desire that seeks to be a place of encounter.

Is prayer about a response? Perhaps, at times, yes. But we all know what it’s like to pray even though we know the request is impossible. “Take this away from me” we might pray in a time of terrible grief, even though we know that the grief will not go away, and even if it were to go away, we would be bereft without it. What is prayer then?

In each of the examples given by Luke's Jesus, we hear the question of want: daily bread; three loaves; ask, search, knock. The relationship with desire — wanting something that we do not have right now — is one that will drive us. Ask any marketer, and they will sing the song of either tapping into culture's desire with product, or shaping culture's desire with *the latest thing they didn't know they needed*.

“What do you want?” Mark has Jesus say to Bartimaeus, a blind man who had been shouting out amidst the crowd for the attention of Jesus. In a way, the answer was obvious. But on a deeper level, desire always reveals us. Desire is vulnerable, because it says “here is what I do not have, and the absence of it compels me.” To state a desire is often to give power away: whether because of asking help, or simply because of the communication of the need.

Recently, at a group I was leading, someone said “When I was younger, I wanted more than anything to be loved. When I was older and someone loved me, I couldn't bear it.” In twenty four words she encapsulated this complicated aspect of human nature: we want; we want not to want; we want our wants not to be seen; we want our wants to be met; when some of our wants are met we are bereft in the wake of desire.

This isn't always the case, of course. But it sometimes is.

For years, I've met people who've been involved in conflict and who — at the stage of a conflict resolution process — say they want to achieve peace with whomever it is that's perceived to be on the other side of the conflict. But the closer some possible resolutions come, the more fragile the process can seem, because underneath the desire for peace is the fear that it may disappoint, or be unfamiliar, or the chasm that the familiar may leave in its absence.

Response

Whatever the shape and practice of your prayer, one thing that seems particularly important is to pray. For this, there are many practices. Ignatius of Loyola urged his followers to try out many, in order that they could find their way to the practice of prayer that met them and supported the direction of their desire.

You may have a practice that suits you well. Or a few practices.

For a number of us on the Spirituality of Conflict team, the form of Collect has been a rich resource. It's at least 1000 years old as a written form.

[We have a resource about collect-writing here.](#)

Prayer

Jesus,
Man of prayer,
You got some of what you wanted
and plenty of what you didn't.
Us too.
May we find our way
to the place where our longing comes from.
Because what drives us
drives us

– sometimes in strange directions –
and we need to be grounded in this longing.
Amen.

Further Reading

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Inner Journey