

Dancing with God: An Essay on Experience of God in Personal Prayer

The roots of Christian contemplative prayer and meditation lie in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and his Jewish heritage. The gospels are filled with references to his pattern of quiet reflection and meditation. The power and wisdom of his active involvement in his Jewish religious community and in the society that surrounded him had their source in his passionate openness to God's presence. It is clear that Jesus experienced a union with God that he knew was fundamental for authentic and abundant human life. He expressed this union with no hesitation or ambiguity.

"The Father and I are one."... "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me."... "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing..." (John 10:30, John 7:16 and John 5:19 NRSV)

Jesus desired this same union for all persons. He prayed to the Holy One: "...that they be one as you and I are one." (John 17:11 NRSV) He knew that his experience of life was what God desired for all human beings: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."... "...the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these..." (John 10:10 and John 14:12)

Contemplative prayer and meditation are opportunities for us to experience this same authentic and abundant human life. They are simple and normal ways for us to be who we really are and require nothing but our desire to be present to God. Yet this simplicity takes much courage in a society that values productivity and control. We are reluctant to place ourselves in God's hands and become vulnerable to transformation. We fear extending the borders of our experience beyond the safety of what we can personally control.

Once, an executive at a silent retreat learned she could just "hang out with God" with no agenda. She took the risk of extending the boundaries of her experience of prayer. Faced with a weekend of silence her first impulse was to take control of the situation and go home. I wish I could say I have always been that honest about my life of prayer. So often I face change, challenge, or even boredom kicking and screaming all the way. I want to stay where it is safe in my life with God. With mostly good intentions I try to tell God what the world needs and how God should fix things. Some times I am reluctant to listen to God because I might hear an invitation or challenge that requires risk or a courageous response on my part. God says, often, "David, you and every human being have every thing necessary to create a just and compassionate society. Don't blame me. Depend on me!"

Why do I have these problems in prayer? Basically, it is an "attitude problem." Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:29 NRSV) Jesus reminds me that the primary foundation for prayer is humility, rooted in the depth of my heart. It is my *attitude* that makes prayer and experience of God possible. I must shift my gaze away from myself. "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39 NRSV) In prayer I must be prepared to let go of the self I work so hard to create and accept that I am a creature of God. This is the attitude is the foundation of my personal prayer, the core of my relationship with God and, therefore, of my relationships with my neighbors.

The attitude of "dying to self" begins in my heart, the seat of my being. It is the place where my true self lives and where God's presence lives within me. When my heart is soft and flexible it will expand and make more room for the One who is already there. I have learned that a humble heart is one that knows it is a creature of God and responds in gratitude, wonder, and love. This attitude is different from the conventional wisdom of today's society that values control, security, and self-interest. Civility, listening to conflicting points of view, and being open to correction are not signs of weakness. Civility, sensitive listening, and humility are manifestations of compassion flowing from a flexible heart. They are the fruit of experience of God in prayer.

The heart of the Christian path is learning to manifest the presence of God, already in us, through our manner of life. Our Christian vocation is to make Christ tangible. The earliest Christians knew that this vocation is rooted and nurtured by the wisdom of the Bible, personal prayer, and the sacramental life of the Christian community. Although they were learned in Greek and Roman philosophy and literature, the early theologians of the Christian church were different from other philosophers and thinkers of their day. Their unique thought flowed from the three spiritual wells mentioned above: prayer, the Bible and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist (Holy Communion). Some of them spoke of the Christian path as a path toward union with God in which, using words from St. Peter's second New Testament letter, the vocation of human beings is to "become participants of the divine nature". (2 Peter 1:4) They used a Greek word, *perichoresis*, to describe this union in which our created humanity and the uncreated energies of God penetrate each other in mutual love. The initiative for this union, present in the life of Jesus Christ, is grace, the outward expression of God's creative Spirit. This union, manifest in the life of Jesus, is possible for all human beings who open themselves to the movement of God's grace.

These early Christian teachers, preachers and pastors were steeped in contemplative prayer and meditation. Their theology (words that flowed from their experience of God) came from reflection on their experiences of God. Their response was a great *enthusiasm* for God (enthusiasm comes from the Greek *en theos, in God*). They used the image of *perichoresis* to describe a mystical life-giving dance with God. When music and a dancer's movement are combined to create a dance, each is changed and affected by the other's presence. There is a transformation. In the same way the simple process of personal prayer is a mutual sharing of presence, a sacred dance. We offer the gift of presence and God offers the same gift. The result is mutual love and in this reciprocity both we and God experience a self-giving which is the threshold of union, a *new creation* in the words of Saint Paul. Pseudo-Macarius, a Syrian monk of the fourth century describes this transformation as "*theosis*" or "deification". He uses the poetic image of the light of the sun to describe how we participate in the divine nature, (undoubtedly remembering Jesus' reference to himself as the "light of the world"):

"It is similar to the sun that is the same all over, without any imperfect part, but is completely all light, brilliantly shining. It is totally light in all its parts... Thus the soul is completely illumined with the unspeakable beauty of the glory of the light of the face of Christ and is perfectly made a participator of the Holy Spirit. It is privileged to be the dwelling-place and the throne of God, all eye, all light, all face, all glory and all spirit, made so by Christ who drives, guides, carries, and supports the soul about and adorns and decorates the soul with his spiritual beauty."¹

The corporate executive, mentioned earlier, wanted to go home rather than face a weekend of silence. But she had the courage to accept, for the moment, "the better way." Her much-needed break from the busy workplace became an opportunity to make the Word, in silence, her home for a few days where she discovered the treasure of hanging out with God. In the silence of the retreat she learned to listen to God as well as the voices and responsibilities of her busy life as a supervisor of financial managers.

There are many voices speaking in the world today...voices of family, co-workers, the homeless, the hungry, voices of political ideologies, voices hounding us to buy more goods and services, voices instilling fear, voices of hope, cynical voices, the multi-faceted voices of the media, vengeful voices, voices that lure us to remain on the surface of life, and our own voices of self-identity and self-preservation. Which voices will we heed? Which words will become the springboards of our action and the source of our vision? I know how easy it is to become torn and scattered in a world of constant and often conflicting voices. My vision may become blurred with such competition for my

¹ *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*. Pseudo-Macarius, translated, edited and with an introduction by George A. Maloney, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1992) Homily 1, 37-38

heart. There are times when I feel imprisoned and voiceless in the midst of the endless demands for my commitment and loyalty. With so much demanding my attention and needing resolution I often wonder where my place is. I sometimes feel helpless and powerless in the wake of the world's needs. Sometimes I "want to go home!" Like the executive I, too, must have the courage to "stay the course" when Jesus invites me to "...make my word your home." Personal prayer is important because it keeps me rooted in God in the busyness of a chaotic world. Hanging out with God and *remaining* in God's company are the only ways to embrace a life that is free and full.

Personal prayer roots us in experience of God and enables us to see the world through God's eyes. When this becomes a daily pattern our words and actions will not be scattered or seem powerless because they are placed in the context of God's desires for the world. We will sense an amazing freedom knowing the outcome of each day's living is in God's hands. This freedom will not lead us away from the world. On the contrary, it will engage us ever more deeply in the life of the world by showing us what is authentic, fundamental, and life-giving. Prayer takes us from the surface of life into its sacred roots and helps us discern actions and situations that are just, responsible, caring, and generative.

When we are rooted in God we are led across a threshold where we encounter and *become* the words, actions, and very consciousness of our *true home*: the Risen Christ. This home is never a haven *from* the world. It is a placeless place where you and I are constantly formed and reformed as we cross and re-cross the threshold between contemplation and action.

"The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore." (Psalm 121:5-8 NRSV)

I know myself well enough to realize I cannot produce or master the qualities of authentic human life on my own. They do not exist in some spiritual supermarket or E-Bay to be placed in my holiness shopping basket. The qualities of authentic human life are sacred gifts, the fruits of my naked openness to the movement of God's Spirit in my heart. I will know their presence when they become manifest in my daily work and relationships. These gifts are humility, fidelity, courage, perseverance, a willingness to be led, patience, and trust. There are other gifts, but these are plenty for a beginner, like me.

And it all begins in the silence of being present to God. The venue is my heart. Jesus said, "...out of the heart, the mouth speaks." My goal is not success in holiness. It is longing to be faithful to the truth of Jesus' words, regardless of the outcome. In the silence of prayer I have learned that this is perfect freedom, the only source of joy. It is what Jesus described as "abundant life". A great mystic, bishop, and theologian of the early Church learned that this life-with-God is never defined or fully developed. It is a call to live deeper and deeper into the mystery of God and my own authentic humanity. It is living with enthusiasm, in God. It is a sacred dance; it is what we are made for!

"When the soul has become simple, unified, really like God, it finds fulfillment...it clings to the One who alone is really lovable and desirable. It is unified with him by the living activity of love. It is transformed into that which it apprehends, continually making fresh discoveries." (St. Gregory of Nyssa)