

Thursday, June 25, 2020

**Pray always and don't lose heart - Pastor Hank French**

*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. (Luke 18:1)*

During my senior year in the seminary, I had a crisis of faith, something not completely uncommon among seminary students. The closer one gets to graduation and ordination, the more one is faced with the utter seriousness of public ministry. At least, that was the case for me.

My crisis of faith had to do with prayer. It no longer made any sense to me. When I prayed it seemed like I was either talking to myself or to a brick wall. My prayers seemed to float upwards like bubbles on the wind, bursting a few feet above the ground, leaving no trace, impacting nothing.

When I took the time to look hard at my prayers, they seemed manipulative, nothing more than a laundry list of things I wanted God to do for me because I couldn't do them for myself. In a moment of spiritual honesty, I concluded that I was treating God like a "cosmic butler." In prayer, I would hand God my laundry list of needs and wants, expecting them to be taken care of. Of course, they never were (and shouldn't have been).

I found myself in a spiritual and moral quandary. I could become a pastor and live a lie, or I could have integrity, leave the seminary, and find some other profession in which to earn my living. You see, pastors are always expected to pray: in Sunday worship, at the beginning and ending of meetings, beside hospital beds, at funerals and weddings, at graduation and confirmation parties, during pastoral counseling sessions and pastoral visits to shut-ins. Invite a pastor to dinner with a dozen other people and you know who will be asked to say grace before the meal. Day after day, over the telephone, in conversations before or after worship, in the aisles of the supermarket, people share their needs, their sorrows, their troubles and ask: "Pastor, would you please pray for me?" They expect—and have a right to expect—that their pastor will do just that.

You see my quandary: surrender my integrity, become a pastor, and go through the motions of prayer, or keep my integrity and find some other vocation to live out my calling to follow Jesus. I went to the library and looked up "prayer" in the card catalog. I found a book titled *Contemplative Prayer* by Thomas Merton. This little book introduced me to the long Christian tradition of contemplative prayer or Christian meditation—a form of prayer that I have been practicing for most of the last 45 years—and it has made all the difference.

Meditation is an ancient Christian practice that draws one into that silence where God can be known in love. As Merton wrote, this prayer is a "wordless and total surrender of the heart [to God] in silence." It is being still in order to know God (Psalm 46:10). Christian meditation and contemplative prayer are often called "the prayer of silence" or the "prayer of the heart" for it is in deep interior silence that we know, love, and rest in the God who is love (1 John 4:7-8).

This practice, where "for God alone my soul waits in silence" (Psalms 62:5), made prayers of petition, intercession, praise and thanksgiving richly meaningful once more.

Prayer: Thank you, Holy One, for meeting us in the silence where our souls are nourished and made ready for service. Amen.