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The posture of prayer

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | May. 31, 2014 Spiritual Reflections

Prayer is the motif that pervades the sacred texts today.

In the first reading from Acts, Luke offers us a glimpse of the nascent church after the ascension of Jesus. Having retreated to the upper room, the Eleven, along with Mary and some other women, "devoted themselves with one accord to prayer." Before formulating a missionary strategy, before recruiting others to help them in their ministry, before determining how best to deflect the threat of Roman and Jewish opposition -- before all else, they prayed.

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Acts 1:12-14
Psalm 27
1 Peter 4:13-16
John 17:1-11

In today's Gospel, the Johannine Jesus is featured praying what has been called his High Priestly Prayer for himself as well as those whom God had given him as disciples. Jesus could have formulated a plan of action for his disciples or provided them with a list of helpful hints on how to conduct themselves. Instead, Jesus prayed. He stood before God with open hands and an open heart, and asked for God's tender care and compassion for those he loved. In so doing, Jesus taught his followers that the primary posture of a believer before God is one of prayer. Before any plans are made, before any agenda is set, before all else, those who continue the ministry of Jesus are to pray. This means that we consciously decide to live in the presence of God.

As Henri Nouwen has noted, some consider prayer a weakness, or a support system that we use when there seems to be no other option (*The Only Necessary Thing*, Crossroad Pub., 1999). But this is only true when the God of our prayers is created in our own image and adapted to our needs and concerns. However, when prayer is authentic and God-centered, it enables us to reach out to God and to be pulled away from self-preoccupations. True prayer encourages us to leave familiar ground so as to enter into a new world beyond the confines of our mind or heart.

Not an exercise to be limited to Sunday mornings or to a set period of time each day, praying, insisted Nouwen, is living (*With Open Hands*, Ave Maria Press, 1972). It is eating and drinking, action and rest, teaching and learning, playing and working. Pervading every aspect of our existence, prayer is the ever-evolving recognition that God is! God is wherever we are, always reaching out, always drawing us near, ever revealing an unending love for us.

When Charles H. Spurgeon was trying to impress upon his students the importance of continuous prayer, he offered the example of Martin Luther, as told by Luther's contemporary Theodorus: "I overheard him in prayer, but good God, with what life and spirit did he pray! It was with so much reverence as if he were speaking to God, yet with so much confidence as if he were speaking to his friend" (quoted in Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, Zondervan, 1954).

In a similar manner, Mother Teresa encouraged her sisters to remember that "every act of love is a prayer. Prayer is action in love and love in action is service" (*The Joy in Loving*, Penguin Group, 1997). With that conviction, Mother Teresa led her sisters through the streets of the city, seeking out and reverently ministering to those who were regarded as the untouchables. When she bathed a leper, she was praying; when she fed hungry, crying babies, there she was praying too, not with words but with her hands, her heart and her selflessness.

If we could be convinced that all we are and all we do can be a prayer, how might that influence the way we are with one another? Might we be kinder? Perhaps we might be more thoughtful and less selfish, less angry, less critical, less sharp; more tender, more attentive, more giving.

When the followers of Jesus came together in the Upper Room (first reading, Acts), they were at once fearful yet determined, cautious yet daring, insecure and yet fully trusting in the presence and power of Jesus. Through prayer -- that is, through their communion with God and with the strength they gained from one another -- they grew stronger and more resolute in their willingness to preach the good news of salvation.

Their example as well as that of the Johannine Jesus (Gospel) urges us toward a similar devotion to that quality of prayer that will fuel all our efforts and fire our hearts with the energy and fortitude we need to be Christ's witnesses and servants in the world, regardless of the cost (second reading, 1 Peter). This is the posture each of us is to assume before God and all others. Amen.

[Patricia Sánchez holds a master's degree in literature and religion of the Bible from a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.]

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