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PRAYER AS SEEKING DEPTH

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[First in of a four-part Advent series on Prayer]

In our more reflective moments we sense the importance of prayer; yet, we struggle to pray. Sustained, deep prayer doesn't come easy for us. Why?

First of all, we struggle to make time for prayer. Prayer doesn't accomplish anything practical for us, it's a waste of time in terms of tending to the pressures and tasks of daily life, and so we hesitate to go there. Coupled with this, we find it hard to trust that prayer actually works and brings about something real in our lives. Beyond that, we struggle to concentrate when we try to pray. Once we do settle in to pray, we soon feel ourselves overwhelmed by daydreams, unfinished conversations, half-forgotten melodies, heartaches, agendas, and the impending tasks that face us as soon as we get up from our place of prayer. Finally, we struggle to pray because we really don't know how to pray. We might be familiar with various forms of prayer, from devotional prayers to different kinds of meditation, but we generally lack the confidence to believe that our own particular way of praying, with all its distractions and missteps, is prayer in the deep sense.

One of the places we can turn for help is the Gospel of Luke. More so than any of the other Gospels, this is the Gospel of prayer. In Luke's Gospel there are more descriptions of Jesus in prayer than in all the other Gospels combined. Luke gives us glimpses of Jesus praying in virtually every kind of situation: He prays when he joy-filled, he prays when he is in agony, he prays with others around him, and he prays when he is alone at night, withdrawn from all human contact. He prays high on a mountain, on a sacred place, and he prays on the level plane, where ordinary life happens. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus prays a lot.

And the lesson isn't lost on his disciples. They sense that Jesus' real depth and power are drawn from his prayer. They know that what makes him so special, so unlike any other religious figure, is that he is linked at some deep place to a power outside of this world. And they want this for themselves. That's why they approach Jesus and ask him: "Lord, teach us to pray!"

But we must be careful not to misunderstand what constituted their attraction and what they were asking for when they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. They sensed that what Jesus drew from the depth of his prayer was not, first of all, his power to do miracles or to silence his enemies with some kind of superior intelligence. What impressed them and what they wanted too for their own lives was the depth and graciousness of his soul.

The power they admired and wanted was Jesus' power to love and forgive his enemies rather than embarrass and crush them. What they wanted was Jesus' power to transform a room, not by some miraculous deed, but by a disarming innocence and vulnerability that, like a baby's presence, has everyone solicitously guarding his or her behavior and language. What they wanted was his power to renounce life in self-sacrifice, even while retaining the enviable capacity to enjoy the pleasures of life without guilt. What they wanted was Jesus' power to be big-hearted, to love beyond his own tribe, and to love poor and rich alike, to live inside of charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, longsuffering, fidelity, mildness, and chastity, despite everything within life that militates against these virtues. What they wanted was Jesus' depth and graciousness of soul.

And they recognized that this power did not come from within himself, but from a source outside him. They saw that he connected to a deep source through prayer, through constantly lifting to God what was on his mind and in his heart. They saw it and they wanted that depth-connection too, for themselves. So they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray.

Ultimately, we too want Jesus' depth and graciousness in our own lives. Like Jesus' disciples, we also know that we can only attain this through prayer, through accessing a power that lies inside the deepest deep of our souls and beyond our souls. We know too that the route to that depth lies in journeying inward, in silence, through both the pain and the quiet, the chaos and the peace, that come to us when we still ourselves to pray.

In our more reflective moments, and in our more desperate moments, we feel our need for prayer and try to go to that deep place. But, given our lack of trust and our lack of practice, we struggle to get there. We don't know how to pray or how to sustain ourselves in prayer.

But in this we are in good company, with Jesus' disciples. And so a good beginning is to recognize what we need and where it is found. We need to begin with a plea: Lord teach us to pray!