

“Praying Fervently”

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New Testament Lesson: Matthew 20:29-34

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 28:1-2 and 6-9

Katie Bhar, in the online journal Elephant, asks the question, “To What Are We Blind?”¹ “We are blind to the person sitting across from us on the bus. The driver in the car next to us at a red light. The anonymous pedestrian rushing past us on the street.” “We can see what they’re wearing, what color their hair is, how tall they are, and maybe, in a blink of intimate eye contact, the color and depth of their eyes, a glimpse of feeling and emotion...” ... “Perhaps Alden Nowlan said it best in his poem (titled) A note on the public transportation system. “Once you’ve spoken you can never go back to being comfortable with silence.” ... “So instead of risking our comfort, we turn a blind eye,” writes Bhar, “avert our eyes to the intimacy of eye contact, and the nameless remain nameless, never to be seen again.” ... “We have been given the gift of empathy, a vital tool enabling us to identify and relate to the nameless faces around us.”

In today’s New Testament lesson, Jesus shows us how to use this gift of empathy, in his interaction with the two blind men at the side of the road. A large crowd is following Jesus out of Jericho; next stop? Jerusalem. And there by the side of the road are two blind men, shouting, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” The crowd sternly orders them to be quiet; but they shout even more loudly, ‘Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!’ With that, Jesus stops and calls to them, saying, “What do you want me to do for you?” Doesn’t that exchange sound like prayer – calling out to Jesus for help, and waiting for the response? Jesus does respond (He responds) with compassion, says Matthew, touches their eyes, and immediately they regained their sight ...” That’s ***the power of prayer!***

Even though prayer is not always answered the way we want, still we pray. Just like the two men who were shut down by the crowd and then shouted all the louder, we keep praying. We have confidence that Jesus hears us and cares about us.

There are a lot of ways to pray. We typically think of prayer as closing our eyes, bowing our heads and asking God for something – or maybe you stretch out your arms and gaze at the heavens. But Jesus shows us that prayer is more a way of life than a way of standing or kneeling. The people who interacted with Jesus during his earthly ministry were praying with every interaction. Some, like the chief priests and scribes, were praying he would just go away. Others, like the two blind men, were praying for healing.

¹ <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2012/09/to-what-are-we-blind-katie-bhar/>

And then there are those in the crowd who don't seem to know how to pray. They follow after Jesus with lots of excitement and expectations, but in the end, they just seem to get in the way. The crowd following Jesus is completely clueless about what's happening between God and the blind men. God put it in their hearts to call upon Jesus to heal them, and the crowd would shut it down, block it, ordering them to be quiet. And still they pray, "Lord, let our eyes be opened."

Interestingly, the Greek word translated as "eyes" means "eyes of the soul." The blind men – who see Jesus in their hearts as "Lord, Son of David" – want to regain their physical sight. And the crowd who gets in the way of this – the crowd that doesn't know who Jesus really is and what he's all about – they are the ones who actually need to have the eyes of the soul opened.

What gets in their way of seeing Jesus for who he really is? These are the same people who have been with Jesus all along, during the Sermon on the Mount where he said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." Where is the crowd's mercy?

This is the same crowd for whom Jesus had compassion, curing the sick, and when they were hungry, Jesus fed them, 5,000 of them with only five loaves and two fish. Where is the crowd's faith? It's the same crowd that in a few weeks will follow Jesus into Jerusalem, spreading their cloaks on the road ahead of him, waving palm branches, and shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! ... Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Where is their vision of what God is really up to? They have no mercy, no faith, and no vision. And so this same crowd becomes the ones who turn Jesus over to Pontius Pilot to be crucified.

No matter what Jesus has done for them and for others right before their eyes, the crowd is blind to who he is and what he's all about. They have no relationship with Jesus, with God.

Trappist monk and author Thomas Keating once said that "prayer is like having a date with God." If that's true, than the crowd has not spent enough time with God, not spent enough time in prayer? What are some ways that we can spend more time with God and thus come to see Jesus more clearly? Of course, there is the type of prayer I mentioned earlier, eyes closed, head bowed.

But prayer is also about opening our eyes, and recognizing God's presence as we interact with one another. Let's try that right now. Turn to the person next to you and ask, "Can I pray for you," and then listen to the answer. You don't necessarily need to pray for that person right now; start by just listening for the answer, for a prayer concern, for God's presence between you, and then follow your heart. Even if they say "no," or don't really answer at all, listen to what God is saying in that moment. Take it into your heart. Just interact with that person in the spirit of prayer. Let's do that now for a few moments, and then we can look at what happened. (3 min.)

Through an exercise like this, we came to see that people really are praying all the time, if we stop to listen with a prayerful heart. God speaks to us – and through us – in our interactions with others.

Someone might tell you about getting through a rough spot in life. Thank God; that's prayer. Someone else might not know which way to turn; I pray that God would provide guidance. That's prayer; that and watching expectantly as God does work in our lives. Others might feel isolated and alone. Reaching out with a gentle touch; that's prayer. Praying fervently, with great warmth and feeling and spirit – this is what makes a difference.

When we interact with another human being, while recognizing and acknowledging the spirit of Christ between us, that's a type of prayer. That's living a prayerful life, in which God is present and active.

The crowd surrounded Jesus, but failed to really take notice of him. They were only happy with him when they were getting what they wanted. But the two men – even though they were physically blind – had faith enough to place themselves at the mercy of Jesus – “have mercy on us, Lord.” And Matthew tells us that after Jesus touched their eyes and they regained their sight and they followed him.”

How well do we follow Jesus in our lives? I don't mean being a good person. I mean do we really follow the movements of Jesus? Do we take notice of our relationship with God, in all the moments of our lives?

Every moment is an opportunity for prayer. Every moment is an opportunity to spend time with God. When we take the time to stop and listen to the needs of others, we're spending time with God, and that's a time of prayer. When we listen to someone's needs with compassion in our hearts, we are doing so in Christ, and that is prayer. And when we respond with a compassionate touch in the spirit of Christ, that interaction is a form of prayer.

There are opportunities to pray all around us. It's just a matter of opening our eyes to who Jesus is and what he's up to, and then following him, drawing near to him, in all the moments of our lives, in all our interactions with others.

Let's do that this week and in the days that follow; look for God in our interactions with others – at work and at school and out in the community – and recognize that as a time of prayer, a time to get to know God better, a time to get to know Jesus and his way of responding to others. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, hear our prayers. We take great comfort in knowing that you see each one of us and know our deepest needs. And yet you have told us to come to you in prayer, and so we do so in humility and faith.

God, some of us are sick – we ask for you to cure us.
Some of us are without work – we ask that you would provide.
Some of us can no longer see through our tears – heal our hearts.

We are so grateful for the many beautiful blessings you have given us. We have not forgotten them. But we know that you are not unfamiliar with our sorrows, so we give them to you now. Take them and bring beauty from ashes as only you can.

For it was you, O God, who brought light from darkness. Help us to see your light so well that it not only illumines our path but reflects off us to illumine others.

We pray this prayer in the name of the One who was called the Light of the World, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to say when we pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**