

Epiphany 5, Year B
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My children talk about God the creator as a person. They conceptualize God as a being who has finite characteristics like we do. That is a result of the stage of development they are in. What amazes me though is that despite the concreteness of their image of God, they have an incredible intimacy with God that many of us adults struggle to reclaim. My children and other children I know, find it very natural to speak about God's feelings being hurt, or God crying with us if we are hurting. They speak about God's joy in the sunrise or speak about how God must have thought something was really funny. Around Christmas time one child said asked me if I thought God knew Santa Claus. When I said yes, she said, "I bet they are best friends." Children, though often very concrete in their image of God are wide ranging in their experience of God.

It is a bit of a paradox that as we grow up, we may become more broad-ranging in our images for God, but often more restricted in our intimacy with God. We may think more about God, and spend less conscious time in the divine presence. Our images expand

while our sense of God's partnership with us in the full spectrum of human experience and emotion wanes.

I was thinking all of this because of one line in this morning's Gospel. Mark tells us, "*In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.*" Jesus extracted himself from all of his teaching and healing and he prayed. From a number of references to his private prayer life within the Gospels, we know that he put himself in intimate contact with God on a regular basis. For Jesus it seems what worked best was getting up before anyone else, and getting away to a place of solitude. What works for you?

For me, some days my best prayer time is in the half dark kitchen, for the 3 minutes that it takes for the water kettle to boil for that first cup of morning tea. For you it might be while you are sitting at a red light, or moving in slow traffic, or walking your dog, or taking your shower, or lying in bed just after waking, or just before falling asleep. Prayer often happens in the cracks of life.

Some of us are blessed with larger chunks of time for prayer—daily devotional time, quiet days, Sabbath time, retreats - when we

can step back from the daily routines and structures of life to allow for a new or deeper awareness of the One who undergirds it all. But finding the space, though a challenge can sometimes feel like the easy part when it comes to prayer. Once we are in the space of prayer we may wonder what to do, or be concerned that what we are doing is not right.

In his book The Word is Very Near You: A Guide to Praying With Scripture, Martin Smith notes:

“Few people talk about their prayer life without betraying their sense of shame and inadequacy. But what is at fault is rarely laziness, but rather the projecting onto God of the image of the taskmaster. How can there be intimacy with one who is waiting for us to fulfill a quota of prayer-work?... But what if God does not demand prayer as much as gives prayer? What if God wants prayer in order to satisfy us? What if prayer is a means of God nourishing, restoring, healing and converting us?... What if our part in prayer is primarily letting God be giver? Instead of prayer being another demand that threatens to deplete our energy further, it could become the place of replenishment and access to the love which gives life meaning.”

Smith also writes:

“In prayer we are never ‘getting a conversation going’ with God. We are continuing a conversation which God has begun. If in a walk by the river my mood of anxious self-preoccupation is broken by a sudden awareness of the beauty of the sunlight reflecting in the water, and the swirling of the birds, and I find myself turning to God in a brief expression of praise and appreciation, I am not starting a conversation with God. God spoke first in the language of creation, wooing me back from isolation into belonging and from anxiety into life-giving awareness. Though we seemingly open conversation, our opening is in response to who God has been for us, or what God has done, or is making known to us, or causing us to feel...

Prayer is primarily attentiveness to God’s disclosure to us and our heart’s response to that disclosure. Furthermore, in much prayer the attention we pay to God’s disclosure is our response. If, for example, in prayer we are made aware that God loves us as we are, even in our mediocrity, our best response is to savor that, to allow it to sink in, rather than to start to make resolutions and promises to God, which might be a subtle way of changing the subject to what we can do... Our contemplative awareness and taking in of God’s touch and word is just the ‘answer’ in

prayer that God is hoping for. This answer will gradually get spelled out, not so much by many words in the prayer time, but in the action and growth that our acceptance of God's disclosure will make possible."

These words are just a sampling of the wealth of wisdom in this book and I highly recommend it to you. Also Smith will be in our backyard in July to lead a retreat at Adelynrood.

In just a few weeks the church year will lead us back into the landscape of Lent. It can be a time renewal in prayer for us. A time for us to let shame or inadequacy around our prayer lives fall away. A time to let the source, that Jesus knew so intimately and which has been with us since before we were, touch us. May Lent be a time for us to be nourished and strengthened, and surprised with just what we need by the One who knows us better than anyone. The one who is closer to us than our own breath.

In Christ's name. Amen+