



on prayer

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Scripture Reading: Psalm 13

"How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?" (Psalm 13:1-2)

In the following I would like to probe a few Christian assumptions about prayer which I found problematic over the years. I hope that this small exercise will empower you to experience a greater freedom with your own personal prayers. I have phrased each point as a kind of permission to be true to yourself. I will do so in conversation with one of my favorite prayers of Rainer Maria Rilke, from *The Book of Hours*, I: 45, as translated by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows.

Verse by verse, the closest we may come to innocence!

First clarification: It is ok to begin praying when in need.

"You come and go. The doors swing closed

ever more gently, almost without a shudder.

Of all who move through the quiet houses,
you are the quietest." (Rilke)

The opening verse breathes a wonderful familiarity with the divine. God is addressed as a regular visitor to one's home. But one can hardly hear God's coming and going. There is a quietness that accompanies God's movement. Are we to imagine God tiptoeing around the house? In other words: Is it a quietness that does not want to disturb, indicating a constant, but unobtrusive presence? Our scripture reading, Psalm 13, reminds us of how such quietness can easily become an unsettling silence evoking a frightening sense of loneliness and isolation. The portrayal of God as "the quietest" carries both positive and negative connotations. Yes, God does not impose him- or herself on us. But at the same time this quiet God can become too quiet and can so easily be silenced by the noise of tragedy and uncertainty.

"How long, Lord?" It is ok to begin praying only when we can

no longer bear such silence. There are those, of course, who look down on people who suddenly start praying only because they are faced with a dramatic situation which renders them powerless. Their comments about atheists or agnostics praying when in despair are condescending. As if those prayers lack integrity and authenticity. As if a faith rekindled by a situation of serious need is morally questionable. As if to call out for God as the last resort somehow injures God's honor. Meanwhile the theologian Friedrich Heiler, in his book *Das Gebet* (The Prayer), argued that historically prayer must have its origins in moments of crisis and need. Written in the last year of World War I., Heiler refers to experiences of complete powerlessness which provoked a cry for help and created the humbling awareness of being dependent on a higher power. He lists drought and hunger, storm and lightning, attacks from enemies and wild animals, illness and pandemics, but also feelings of guilt and shame.

"How long, Lord", we hear the psalmist pray. Those persistent and insistent repetitions of "how long" allow us to sense something of the utter despair and urgency that gave rise to this prayer of lament. For too long someone must have felt unknown and unseen, trapped within his or her own thoughts of sorrow and pain, mocked and ridiculed by those who are to blame for this crisis.

And yet, the "how long" is not an expression of hopelessness. For it reckons that it can only be a matter of time until God will finally respond, resume control and make things right. The question is not "if", but "when". Despite all the opposition, the psalmist continues to express his or her trust in God's "unfailing love." Such hope should not be confused with some form of pragmatic optimism, that somehow and someday things will get better again. It is rather a hope that is deeply rooted in an unshackable trust, that God is love and that therefore God's goodness will finally triumph over one's encounters with evil and suffering. Such a conviction cannot be explained in rational terms. It sustains a resistance to the tragic and unjust in life. And it matters with whom we hope.

In his reflections on prayer ("Das Geheimnis anreden. Gedanken über das Gebet", in NDR Kultur) Ezzelino von Wedel helps us to understand how prayer, from its very beginning, is provoked and shaped by the tremendous expectations that we have of God and which God has of us. Von Wedel takes us back

to Abraham's and Sarah's paradigmatic call, the promise of a new future in a far away land, with descendants as numerous as the stars in the skies and the sand on the dunes. Such promises evoked expectations that continued to be disappointed and in turn inspired prayers of anger and grief, of anguish and lament. "How long, Lord?" At the same time the promise of land and descendants was couched in the language of covenant: Yes, God put God's self under enormous pressure. But God also expected those who trusted the promise to fulfill their side of the covenant and live a life characterized by loving and caring relationships which extended especially to those at the margins of society. But again those expectations were also often disappointed and inspired prayers of repentance and confession. The "how long, Lord" oscillated between two poles, two sets of expectations which would conjure experiences of both love and betrayal. And all those raw feelings of joy and pain shaped the book of Psalms and its diversity of moods and genres. Its prayers and songs are carefully composed and poetic in nature. They remind us that there is a formfulness to joy and to grief. Words and metaphors, phrases and silences, rhythms and rhymes enable us to hold and contain what threatens to destroy our spirit. They represent the building blocks of our linguistic house of being, a shelter from the storms and uncertainties that come with the gift of life and the expectations raised by a covenant of love.

Second clarification: It is ok to be uncomfortable with praying in public.

"We become so accustomed to you,
we no longer look up
when your shadow falls over the
book we are reading
and makes it glow. For all things
sing you: at times
we just hear them more
clearly." (Rilke)

Most of us have witnessed healing services transmitted on TV: People standing with arms raised high, eyes closed, anguished faces. And then the prayers of charismatic, confident healers. I watch from a safe distance, but feeling uncomfortable. There is something voyeuristic about this spectacle. I am witnessing something intimate and delicate, which resists being put on display. Jesus's commandment to go into the broom cupboard when we pray is very sensible and sensitive (Matthew 6). There is always the danger, that when we pray in public our prayer becomes a performance. At that moment we are no longer praying to God, but praying to be seen, to impress. How often have we witnessed prayers that were second sermons. And how hard it is to not instrumentalize one's prayer as a way of giving advice to those with whom we pray. Jesus sends us into the broom cupboard in order to protect and safeguard the kind of intimacy and honesty our prayer to God requires.

Few of us would want others to listen when we open our heart and declare our love to the person who is closest to us. And is prayer not such a conversation with God, who is like a mother and father to us?

It is fine to be insecure and unsettled when being asked to pray in a small group. Also because in such a moment we reveal our own dependency, like a child, to a parent God. We acknowledge our limitations and vulnerability. Meanwhile we have been brought up to be self-reliant and self-sufficient. No wonder that even the Danish philosopher Soeren Kierkegaard, who was everything but shy about his faith, would confess "to blush like a young woman", when surprised at prayer.

Interestingly we often read about Jesus moving away from the crowds and from the inner circle of disciples in order to be by himself and to pray. Why did the disciples ask him to teach them to pray and what to pray? Did they possibly never see or hear him pray? Rilke's second verse reveals the gift of such an intimacy with God which Jesus did not share with others and which clearly became the place where he sourced himself for his mission. Yes, even in the garden of Gethsemane he asked them to watch and pray for him while he himself sought a place of prayer away from them.

Throughout his life and ministry God's shadow made the scrolls Jesus read glow in a way that allowed him to discover God's coming, the arrival of God's kingdom in the most ordinary

moments of life: The sowing of seeds, the baking of bread, the sharing of a meal. It enabled him to live and minister with a strong sense of God's presence in his own life. It was a presence that took on the character of a parent-child relationship. And at the heart of his ministry was the desire to invite those he met into a similar parent-child relationship. He did not regard his status as a child of God as singular, but wanted everyone to see themselves as children of God and experience such trust and intimacy.



Third clarification: It is ok to keep searching for new images of God.

Rilke: "Often when I imagine your wholeness cascades into many shapes.

You run like a herd of luminous deer

and I am dark, I am forest."

It would be idolatry to limit God to one concept or image. And yet for too long we have turned God into a man - a self-sufficient and omnipotent, authoritarian and removed father figure. And we did so despite God's willingness to empty God's self of all power and become a human being in Jesus, weak and vulnerable, wounded and suffering, dependent and needy. It was during his imprisonment that

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian, pastor, and martyr came to the realization that "only the suffering God can help." It was during our recent Disability Sunday that for some only a God in a sip and puff wheelchair has any credibility.

We need to think harder about the kind of images we use to describe and address God. What kind of characteristics do they imply. How do they define greatness? To what extent do they simply reflect a culture that values independency, perfection, and self-sufficiency? What kind of expectations do they raise? And what does it mean to be created in such an image of God?

Rilke speaks about a wholeness that cascades into many shapes. He then imagines God as a herd of luminous deer, while we ourselves become a dark forest. When I shared this verse with my daughter on the way to church, she immediately thought of how shy and timid the deer is, For weeks I had thought about Rilke's poem. But I had not noticed such tenderness and timidity about God. I now keep imaging myself to be such a forest, waiting in silence and darkness, for God to come.

Yes, we need to become bolder and more creative in our imaginings of God. For each image opens up new ways of dreaming our interconnectedness, taking us a step closer to what some have described as "vulnerable communion."

Fourth clarification: It is ok to run out of words and take action oneself.

Rilke: "You are a wheel at which I stand,
whose dark spokes sometimes catch me up,
revolve me nearer to the center. Then all the work I put my hand to widens from turn to turn."

Our capacity for disappointment is limited. Not everyone has the same reservoirs of patience. There comes a point, when we

feel that actions need to follow our prayers and words, when we realize that Jesus does have no other hands and feet than our own hands and feet.

Again Rilke surprises us with an unusual image for God: A wheel with dark spokes. With every turn we are drawn deeper into the center. It describes a movement to the center, an experience of growing solidarity and unity with God in shared suffering and shared commitment to the world. But the initial movement inwards is then followed by a movement

outwards: From this mystical oneness new strength and vision emboldens our hands, moving us outwards, widening the sphere of our influence - turn by turn.

In that way Rilke's prayer as a whole displays a fascinating movement from contemplation to action, from stillness to activity, from waiting to responding, from being turned to turning the wheel of time.

Amen.

