

## ENEMIES OF PRAYER

There are little enemies of prayer, like distraction, or feeling unworthy, or being undisciplined. They can do as much damage to our relationship with God as the big enemies, but we will talk about them some other time. The big enemies of prayer are ignorance, pride, and distrust. If you cannot get through the big enemies, you don't even get a chance to wrestle with the little ones. My suspicion is that most of us know about, and know what to do about, pride and distrust – which is not to imply that we always *do* it. But let's talk about ignorance.

In the sense I'm using it today, "ignorance" is not about being stupid; it is not about being slow, or having no information. It is about what some of the old saints (fourteenth century) called, "The Cloud of Unknowing."

Some people like to do jigsaw puzzles. A card table, a little fire in the fireplace, maybe a bit of a storm on a wintry night, some popcorn, and maybe a person or two that you love. And there are all these little pieces all over the table, and you try to put them together so you can see the big picture. Interestingly, some people, even wanting loved ones present in such a scenario, want to put the puzzle together all by themselves. Why is that? On the other hand, why *any* of it? I mean, it's really pretty strange. You have the picture to start out with. Somebody has to go to a lot of work to cut it all apart and mix up the pieces in the first place. Then you spend all that time pretending you are achieving something by putting the pieces back together again so you can see the picture that was already there in the first place.

Yet games reflect life. We are always trying to put the pieces together so we can see the larger picture. Maybe if we can learn to do it on the card table, somehow it will help groove our minds to do it better in real life. In any case, every breakthrough – whether in physics, chemistry, biology, geology, economics, or theology – every breakthrough comes when somebody puts the picture together more clearly than it was seen before. In real life, we always have some of the pieces in the wrong place and are just trying to pretend they fit because it's the best we can do at the moment. But it is an ignorance, an *unknowing*. And when it suddenly occurs to us that we can shift this piece over to that place ... and a couple of those go over here ... and then the whole picture comes into

better focus. Everything fits better and works better, and it is also more beautiful. *Beauty* is one of the hints. I think I must be one of the slowest ones to learn this.

Nevertheless, for example: “Making love” in certain contexts – in some situations – really doesn’t fit the bigger picture. Some of the pieces may be there, but too many are still missing or are in the wrong place. We can pretend the pieces fit, but they do not. We can pretend everything is fine on the outside, but the inside knows better. And “making money” by certain means and methods doesn’t fit the larger picture. It sometimes takes years to realize that even if we can cheat on the outside, what we become on the inside is what shapes our lives. You don’t have to rob a bank to become mean, nasty, and critical; besides, robbing a bank takes courage. And living to get my own way – being my own god – doesn’t really fit the larger picture. I am simply saying that a lot of life is about getting the pieces in the right place, and seeing the bigger picture more and more clearly.

No surprise, but Christianity does not work very well for a lot of people because they do not see the larger picture. They do not have the pieces in the right places. Naturally, our world is still quarreling over who has the right picture, and how it really would work best. But we each get to live with the best picture we can find. And we still get to shift to a better picture every time we see how the pieces go together better.

In my view, Christianity is not primarily about institutions, structures, rules, or organizations. They exist, but they are only helpful if they serve the larger picture. Christianity is about each individual coming into a personal relationship with God – a relationship that is vibrant, alive, and always changing, deepening, growing. In my picture, all faith community – the church – grows from and depends upon each individual’s personal relationship with God. If we try to change that around, which most of our world does most of the time, and make the church (or the organization, or the rules, or the belief system) primary – and *hope* that the individuals will find a relationship with God if we get the structures right – then I think the pieces are in the wrong place and the picture is way out of focus. The primary, crucial, most important thing is each individual’s personal relationship with the Living God – scary as that is ... unpredictable as that is ... beyond the control of this world, and all of its threats and structures, as that is.

So what is the picture? Put the picture together: Jesus had lived and preached among us. Jesus had been crucified because of the jealousy, animosity, fear, and anger of our human response to Him. Jesus had risen from the dead by the power of God. And still there was no church! We already had His ministry, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter, but the church had not been born yet. Not until Pentecost.

What hints did Jesus give us about this pattern – the true picture? *“I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you.”* (John 14:16-18) Can you let the piece go into place? No other piece goes in this place.

John says the disciples were given this comfort the night of the Last Supper, just before Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. In parallel passages from Luke, Jesus reiterated the message to His followers after His resurrection: *“And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high.”* (Luke 24:49)

*“And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, ‘you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He said to them: [‘Will you please stop trying to mind everybody’s business but your own, and getting all off track?’] *‘It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But **you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.**’*” (Acts 1:4-8)*

Can you let the piece go into place? No other piece goes in this place. But sometimes we like to step back and see how it really fits in the larger picture. Step back six hundred years! The prophet Jeremiah: *“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant [a New Testament] with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the*

*LORD: I will put my law within them; and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*" (Jeremiah 31:31-33) Can we fail to feel Pentecost in that prophecy? Well, we *should* go back two thousand years before Jesus – to the call of Abraham – and notice everything in between, but in twenty minutes on only one Sunday ... can we fail to feel Pentecost in that prophecy?

Why do we call it the “New Testament”? When do we think Jeremiah’s message started to come true? PENTECOST! When did Jesus’ ministry truly culminate? When do we begin to see what Jesus was really doing, what He was about, what He came for, and how He thought it would actually begin to happen in a world like ours? PENTECOST! Have you started putting the pieces together yet?

*“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”* (Acts 2:1-4)

Up to this point, Jesus is the story; Jesus is the hero; Jesus is the focal point and, in a sense, is carrying it all and doing it all. But that is not going to make it down through the ages, and it is not going to transform or redeem life for the people – unless they get into the story too. The mission and the ministry of Jesus culminate at Pentecost, not at Easter! Jesus *enacts* the meaning of the communion meal; Jesus infuses – He enters – His people: all who will receive Him. From this point on, what Jesus means – and all that He wants to accomplish – is carried by His People because He is *in them* and *with them*. It is the birthday of the church – Pentecost. Do not be confused by the imagery. The flame is the emblem of the Holy Spirit. The tongue of flame that rests upon each individual is the best way Luke knows how to say that each one received the Holy Spirit – that each one “knew” the reality of Christ’s presence within: leading, guiding, comforting, empowering ... just as Jeremiah had envisioned it. And John the Baptist too: *“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”* (Mark 1:8)

No other piece can fit in this place. They are not writing bylaws, or electing officers. They are not buying land, or putting up buildings. They are not forming organizations, or developing programs, or teaching their children. They eventually will, but that is all secondary response. Whenever and wherever these secondary things become the primary

focus, the Faith will weaken and, if it persists, die. We need to see the picture – put the right pieces in the right place. The Crucifixion is NOT how Jesus saves us. It only gets our attention, shows how much He cares – breaks through all the shields of our animosity, fear, and alienation from God. This is absolutely necessary to reach us, but it is NOT how Jesus saves us. Nor is the Resurrection how He saves us. It establishes our hope. It gives us confidence in the future, and assures us that Jesus is authentic; that God is backing Him; that He is the Life, and the Truth, and the Way; that we can trust Him. This too is absolutely necessary, but it is NOT how Jesus saves us. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit – being with us, going with us, guiding and comforting and scolding and empowering us through all the days of our own journeys here – THAT IS HOW HE SAVES US. *Immanuel*: God with us! Only, not in future promise. In present reality. Pentecost is the birthday of the church. Up until Pentecost, Jesus is the story. But from Pentecost on, WE ARE IN THE STORY TOO! We are in it with Him. He has come to be with us – and in us. Remember? *“I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”* (John 14:18-20)

Have we put this piece in its proper place? No other piece will fit here. Without this piece, there is no picture. Without this piece, none of it works. Without this piece it is just fluff and theory, and we are still in charge of our own lives. And there is no redemption, no transcendence, no life with God.

That’s okay with some people – lots of people, in fact. If you can belong to the right clubs and organizations, have a decent job and pay your bills, love your family and your friends and live to a ripe old age ... that’s sufficient. What more could any person ask? Only, that is not Christianity, not anywhere close to it. And it is not enough for some of us. The heart hurts too much, the soul sees too much, this place is too partial, broken, mindless, and evil, and we are too far away from home.

And so the pieces start fitting into place. First and foremost – and primary to everything else – we are people of prayer. Otherwise we just follow each other. Otherwise it is just the same old song, one more verse. If we are Christians, then first and primary and before all other things, we are people of prayer. We are not “loving” first. We are not well-liked, successful, ethical, or well-educated first. Primary to

all other things, we are people of prayer. We put God first, and we stop neglecting our prayers.

Why? Because we finally see the picture, and we see the pieces in their proper place. Because we finally notice that this was not only the strategy and purpose and plan of our Lord at Pentecost, but it is the very core and essence of who He is. It is what made Him *what* He is. Apart from prayer, Jesus of Nazareth – Jesus Lord and Christ – is not possible, or even conceivable.

From the baptism ... to the forty days in the wilderness ... to the all-night vigils ... to the Garden of Gethsemane – the pieces keep falling into place. Above and beyond all other things, Jesus was a man of prayer. It was the way He prayed that made Him different. His theme was not love, but obedience to God on this personal level of prayer. Love for God was behind His obedience, to be sure. Obedience came from love and trust for God. But the startling thing about Jesus' WAY of Life was His obedience to God. "*Thy will be done.*" Not my will ... and not anybody else's either – not Peter's will, or my mother's will, or the High Priest's will, or the will of the whole Sanhedrin. And they were all competing for Jesus' allegiance just as hard as they knew how.

When the pieces click in, we realize that the truly astounding thing about Jesus was that He lived to please nobody and nothing – except God. This man of love loved only at God's command. By His hours in prayer, He saw the world and the people through God's eyes, and knew that they were both better and more lost than they had any awareness of themselves. He did not use prayer to heal, as if it were a magic wand or something. Rather, because He was a man of such profound prayer, He could see how to heal – and some of you could too, if you would pray as He did. We don't all have the same gifts, but we all have the gifts we were given. Most of us don't know them or use them because we don't have the time to pray like He had. And yes, because He was a man of prayer, Jesus got into more trouble than any of us have ever known.

And I find it interesting that Jesus – the Christ, the Son of God, the all-time ACE of spiritual power, wisdom, discernment, and faithful obedience – knew Himself to be so confused, so uncertain, so troubled, and so conflicted with warring motives that He found it necessary to spend hours and hours in prayer. Jesus knew for sure that by Himself, He was not wise enough or good enough to direct His own life, or to be of any real benefit to others. And so He became a person of prayer –

one who let God live through Him. Surprisingly, this did not destroy His individuality or ruin His personality. It released Him to become who He truly was. But you and me? We are so good and loving and wise – so naturally tuned to God – that a few stray moments are sufficient to keep us on course and obeying our Father’s will? Christ have mercy. God forgive us.

Do you know what the will of God is for your life? Not just in broad, general terms, but in specifics? Not just in high-sounding ideals, but in terms of detailed, pinpointed decisions and actions? Everything Jesus ever said or did – implied or stated – promises a New WAY of Life in which we are no longer in charge of or running our own lives. A WAY wherein our whole focus is turned inward, to the guidance of the Holy Spirit – and our outward behavior is more and more an obedient response to the Holy Spirit within, not a response to all that beckons and pleads and cajoles from without.

Pentecost is the birthday of the church. The church is the people of Christ – the people who live by prayer – the people who have received His Holy Spirit. You do not *go* to church. You *are* the church. Let the pieces fall into place.