

17 C 2022

A little girl dressed in her Sunday best, was running as fast as she could trying not to be late for her Religious Ed. Class. As she ran she prayed, “Dear Lord, please don’t let me be late, Dear Lord, please don’t let me be late.”

While she was running and praying, she tripped on a curb and fell, getting her clothes dirty and tearing her dress.

She got up, brushed herself off, and started running again. As she ran she once again began to pray, “Dear Lord’ please don’t let me be late...But please don’t shove me, either!”

The Scriptures almost demand today that we talk about prayer, since all of them are about prayer. And yet that is always hard to do, because in a way, it presupposes some expertise. And I suspect I have as many good times and bad times and difficulties with prayer as you do. But I have come up with some random remarks on the subject.

One is introduced by one of Eugene O’Neill’s plays, *The Great God Brown*, and some of you may remember that toward the end the man is on his deathbed, and he’s very frightened. And at his side is a woman who has become something of a mother figure to him.

And so she speaks to him, as though he were a child, saying, “Go to sleep Billy. It’s all right.” And he says, “Yes mother.” And then he starts to deliriously explaining what he has experienced in life.

“It was dark,” he says, “and I couldn’t see where I was going, and they all picked on me.” The woman then says, “I know. But you’re tired now. Go to sleep.”

Then Billy in great seriousness says, “To judge the living and the dead.” And in great fear, he adds, “I don’t want justice, I want love.” And the woman replies quietly. “These is only love.”

And as he dies, Billy begins to repeat the words to the only prayer he knows. “Our Father who art in heaven...”

My first remark is what Billy says. “I don’t want justice, I want love.” Most people pray. Statistically, all the polls say that a vast majority in the United States do pray, and pray frequently. But what Billy shows us is that prayer originates in our concept of God, and that’s our first reflection.

On the one hand St. John writes that, “God is love. On the other hand Billy fears that God may just be justice. These are very different viewpoints, and our viewpoint is going to color the way that we pray.

Whether we see God as the all-seeing, all-judging, all critical eye as some of the art works have shown, or whether we see God as loving and embracing us, obviously is going to influence the way we're going to pray.

So the first question we should ask is: "What is my image of God?" If for you God is a loving Father and if you tend to recall Jesus' saying that when you address God say, "Our Father," - prayer will likely come easier. If you envision God as a strict taskmaster, filled with vengeance and anger, prayer is going to be more difficult.

So if we have difficulty with prayer, what we might want to do first is to look at your image of our God. What's God like to you - a friend or foe - a confidant or a rival?

Secondly, a lot of people pray in spurts. They don't always pray - they pray as the need arises. I like to call this the prayer of embarrassment.

The prayer of embarrassment is for those people who suddenly run into difficulty. I hear this now and again. People start coming back to church because there's a problem.

People suddenly start to pray because now they need God because they're in the ditch and they're suffering. They feel very embarrassed by that and they say:

“I don't go to church as often as I should, and I don't pray, and I don't think about God much. But now that the chips are down; now that the doctor told me I have cancer; or I've been fired from my job; or I've been disappointed; or I've been alienated from members of my family; or I'm getting a divorce; or my child's on drugs, or whatever tragedy may arise all of a sudden I'm starting to pray, and I feel squeamish and guilty and embarrassed about that.

And to those declarations you or I might have the understandable reaction of saying: “Forget it. The only reason your coming to God and to the church now is because you have no place else to turn.

Now suddenly that you've lost everything you're knocking on the door. Don't you think God knows all about people like you? Butt off!”

But it is good for us all to remember that the prayer of embarrassment is a valid prayer. We're dealing with a God who has no pride.

We're dealing with a God who is so humble and so foolish -- in the eyes of the world -- that this God runs to and heartily welcomes the prodigal son. This God leaves ninety-nine sheep to gather in the one.

Yes, our God is probably the only one in our lives who stoops to conquer. So don't let that prayer of embarrassment ever put you off – or any of your friends.

For us, it might seem unacceptable and granted continual, habitual, daily prayer is better, but for God, the prayer of embarrassment is still music to the ears and a joy to the heart.

The final remark has to do with what I call the prayer of hindsight. The prayer of hindsight relates to this fact: everyone who is over twenty-five years of age knows that as you go through life there are things that happen that are terrible and horrible and leave scars.

But if you live long enough, you also look back in hindsight and say, "I'd never want to go through that again, but there was, *in fact*, a grace there – there was something positive.

Yes, when we look in hindsight, there are often hidden graces – even in death, in disappointment, in fracture, in hurt, in pain and suffering, and in loss and the only way we were going to discover the hidden graces is through prayer.

They found on a Confederate soldier in the Civil War this little prayer, which has become known as the *Confederate Soldier's Prayer*. I'd like to call it "The Hindsight Prayer." You may have heard it before, but I'd like to share it with you today:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;

I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health, that I might do greater things;

I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.

I asked for riches, that I might be happy;

I was given poverty, that I might be wise.

I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;

I was given weakness, that I might feel the need for God.

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;

I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for,

But everything I had hoped for.

Almost, despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.

I am, among all men, truly blessed.

So I shall leave you with these three brief remarks on the subject of prayer. Again:

First – What is your image of God? It effects how you pray.

Second; never be embarrassed to come to God in prayer even if you have been away for a long time. Our God will always welcome you.

And finally; only through prayer will be able to discover the grace of God in all the happenings of your life.

We, my friends have a God who always hears our prayer – we among all people, are truly blessed.