

Is Anybody There?

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
August 31, 2014

Romans 8:18-28

Brother David Steindl-Rast once shared these words about mysticism and prayer and our relationship with God: “If we think of it as an experience of communion with Ultimate Reality, we have a fair working definition of mystic experience... All of us can experience moments of overwhelming, limitless belonging, moments of universal communion. Those are our own mystic moments. The men and women we call mystics differ from the rest of us merely by giving these experiences the place they deserve in everyone’s life. What counts is not the frequency or intensity of mystic experiences, but the influence we allow them to have on our life. By accepting our mystic moments with all they offer and demand, we become the mystics we are meant to be. After all, a mystic is not a special kind of human being, but every human being is a special kind of mystic.”

I like that quote which is why I chose to share it with you. I know it’s a lot of words and may not be that easy to follow when hearing it for the first time, but I like it because of its suggestion that we are all mystics, we are all spiritual, we are all on a journey seeking deeper communion with God and each other. You may not feel like a mystic or ever call yourself one, but you are.

Michael Yaconelli, a pioneer in youth ministry who served a small church in far northern California, and who we lost much too soon, made a similar point when he wrote, “This may sound shocking to some, but spirituality is a home for those who don’t have life figured out, who don’t know the Bible as well as they could, and who don’t have their spiritual lives all together.”

Then he told a story: “A couple of years ago, my wife and I sat across the table from a woman we highly respect, a deeply spiritual lady who had profoundly impacted our lives. This woman spent most of her life resisting the noise and activity of the world in order to seek God in silence and solitude. She had spent hundreds of weeks in silent retreat. This was a woman so saturated with her faith that you could almost smell God when she came into the room.

“We were talking about prayer. ‘It’s embarrassing to be sitting with you,’ I blurted out. ‘You spend days, weeks, even months in prayer. I’m lucky if I spend ten minutes. Compared to you, I’m afraid I’m not very spiritual.’”

“Her eyes, flashing with anger, caught mine, and she fired back, ‘Oh Mike, knock it off. First of all, you don’t spend every day with me. You don’t really know me at all. I battle depression daily, and it has won during several periods of my life. I don’t have a family. I like to be alone and silent. Trust me, I am just as ‘unspiritual’ as you are.’ Then she said gently, ‘You often think about God, right?’

“ ‘Well, sort of,’ I said.

“ ‘Thinking about God is being with God. Being with God is spirituality. So shut up with the guilt stuff. You have been praying most of your life. You are a spiritual person!’”

“What? I’ve been praying most of my life? What was she talking about? It never occurred to me that praying could include thinking, that praying could be done with eyes open, that praying could be done sitting, driving, dancing, skiing, lying down jogging, working... How could anyone accuse me of being spiritual unless spirituality comes in unlimited shapes and sizes, unless spirituality looks like whatever you and I look like when we are thinking about God, when we are trying to find Jesus, when we are trying to figure out what real Christianity looks like in the real world?... Spirituality is not about being finished and perfect; spirituality is about trusting God in our un-finishedness.” Again, all of us spiritual; all of us mystics.

Sounds good, but then I think of Jesus’ disciples – those closest to him – coming to him and pleading, “teach us to pray.” I confess that such a request is often on my lips. As an ordained minister, sort of a professional pray-er, I say a lot of prayers, in many different settings. Need a prayer? I’ve got one. And yet, so often I feel like Michael Yaconelli.... I should be better at this. My prayer life is so uneven. Why aren’t I more spiritual, more in touch with the divine in my life? And should I even be concerned about this? Does prayer make any difference at all?

But before I beat myself up, doubt myself completely, Paul comes to the rescue. In our text from his letter to the Romans, Paul says a curious thing. Incredibly, he tells us that prayer really isn't about us and our spirituality. When it comes to prayer, it is God who takes the initiative. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought. But that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words..." Did I hear that right? Even when we are a total failure at prayer, the Spirit intercedes; the very Spirit of God prays with us, even prays for us. I come here to worship, to pray, thinking I am seeking out a relationship with God, only to discover a God who is seeking a relationship with me, who may yearn for me more than I yearn for God.

And I begin to wonder if this isn't very close to the heart of the matter, close to the meaning and power of prayer – an ongoing conversation between creature and Creator, the deepening of a relationship even when nothing seems to be happening. As Ruth Burrows, a Carmelite Sister, writes in her book, *Love Unknown*, "Prayer is essentially God's work. Our part is to give time, do our best to keep attention, surrender ourselves as best we can. Faith does not ask for signs, for tokens. When we really grasp that prayer is essentially God's business, not ours, we will never talk of failure... We must be receptive to what God is doing and try not to control the situation ourselves." Being the control freak that I am, I want to do it right. But she says, "Just do it!" and trust the outcome to God.

But why, why hang in there with prayer, why be persistent in prayer, especially if God loves me no matter what or how I pray? I am reminded of the story of a Vermont couple who had been married for several decades. One morning over breakfast, the wife says, "I've noticed that you never tell me you love me anymore." To which the husband replies, "Well, I told you I love you the day we got married. If anything changes, I'll let you know." Which reminds me of the Norwegian man who loved his wife so much he almost told her! My Wisconsin Norwegian relatives like that one – at least the men do! I hope it is clear that, just as words of love are never redundant, never unnecessary, neither are words of prayer. Such words are not meant to convey new information. Rather, they are the language of relationship, words that not only reflect relationship, but also deepen it.

Micha Boyett, in her book, *Found, A Story of Questions, Grace, and Everyday Prayer*, sounds a little like Yaconelli as she shares a reflection from her own spiritual journey. She is an ordained minister, but has given up full-time ministry since becoming a mother. At times she reflects on the "prayerlessness" of her life. One afternoon, as she prepares herself and her home to host a dinner party for her husband's colleagues, she is beset by feelings of inadequacy and insignificance. She tells herself, "This is all you do with your life... Your husband works all day while you iron napkins in an adorable floral apron. You are nothing more than a housewife."

She continues, "Then, in the middle of that thought, I stop mopping. I prop the mop against the wall and look at my apron, which is absolutely as adorable as the lie in my brain said it was. 'Lord', I say, 'I am not ironing and mopping because I have nothing better to do. I am ironing and mopping because I get to take care of some people who deserve to be taken care of.' I sit there with my eyes closed, and I feel God's nearness, the weight of the Spirit pressing in. I imagine God laying his hands on my head and pulling out the lie. 'Thank you,' I whisper."

Maybe we make this prayer thing harder than it is, try too hard, and then turn away filled with feelings of inadequacy about our failures at prayer, our inability to pray as we think we ought. Me...a mystic? I'll never make the grade. But this isn't a competition, it isn't a skill. Again, it's a relationship – a conversation with God that deepens our relationship with God, not unlike a conversation with a friend or a loved one. Says one colleague, "Prayer is a communication with the God who knows us, loves us and seeks us – a two-way process that involves speaking and listening and goes beyond words. Prayer is seeking the God who knows us first; remembering the God who never forgets us. Yes. God already knows us better than we know ourselves, but it is in the act of sharing ourselves that a relationship is born and nurtured." So stay with it, just do it, and don't worry if you are doing it right. For in the process we are changed, believe it or not, we are changed. The very act of praying shapes us until, in the words of Brother Roger from the Taizé community, the more we listen to God who whispers in our hearts, "the more we make our own a prayer which is simple and humble, the more we are led to love and to express it with our life."