

Rector's Reflection
March 2018

Watching the Fire

I was explaining the Jesus Prayer to a group of (mostly) young seminarians on retreat at Holy Cross Monastery Monastery in West Park a couple of weeks ago. (Did you know there is an Episcopalian monastery sitting on the banks of the majestic Hudson across from Hyde Park; check it out.)

I was there with the retreat leader Sr. Elizabeth Broyles of the newly formed order Companions of Mary the Apostle. She was teaching the first-year seminarians from Berkeley Divinity School (the Episcopal divinity school at Yale) about how monastics use a communal rule of life as a trellis for spiritual growth—and individuals can benefit from the practice as well. I was asked to say something about prayer.

There are many kinds of prayer—The Prayer Book lists seven “principal kinds” (it’s in “The Catechism” on page 856; look it up). But I focused on the first two: adoration and praise. Adoration is simply lifting up heart and mind to God, “asking nothing but to enjoy God’s presence.” Just so, “We praise God, not to obtain anything, but because God’s Being draws praise from us.”

Isn’t that lovely? The first two and most fundamental forms of prayer are rather like sitting in front of a warming fire—think burning bush—and seeing beauty in an evening’s sunset. We have only to take time and give attention and offer our selves to the eternal dwelling within the moment, the Being behind the endless succession of becoming that is the world. If we do that, if we sense that, then praise and adoration of God are the natural result.

So what’s the Jesus Prayer? Well, it is an ancient prayer particularly popular in the Orthodox tradition. It is a short mashup of a couple of verses of gospel: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Repeated quietly or silently in rhythm with one’s breathing, it helps to still the mind and bring it down, as the Orthodox teachers of prayer like to say, into the heart.

It’s not easy to still the mind, is it? Our racing thoughts and anxious concerns keep jumping into the quiet fireside scene like small children playing loudly upstairs after they’ve been told to go to bed (don’t make me come up there!).

Let it go, the teachers say; do not cling to or follow the intruding thoughts. Come back to the still center, the quiet fire, the breath prayer.

But perhaps the Jesus Prayer is itself distracting—to think of oneself as sinner does not accord with the modern virtue of healthy self esteem. The seminarians nodded. Yet, of course, it is true. Pope Francis in his first interview after his election was asked to describe himself. He replied, “I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon.”

And if you think about it—to admit our sinful nature is comforting. Relax. No use trying to impress God with how good you are, what good things you have done, what great plans you would like God to help you with. God is not impressed with boasting. On the contrary.

In the deep dark place where we are naked and alone and lost—yet we hear, if we listen, God’s searching question, “Where are you?” So God sought Adam in the Garden of Eden, as Sr.

Elizabeth pointed out. The humbled soul replies, "Here I am." God probes, "Why are you hiding?" "I am naked and ashamed." "Well, don't be. I love you even so. You can't stay in this place though. You have to go out into the world. But I'll tell you what. Why don't we meet early in the morning; find a quiet place to sit, a warm cup of coffee in your hand, and Jesus and the holy Spirit by your side and in your heart. Light a candle and watch the fire. I'll be there (I'm always there). We will just sit for a minute, as daylight grows. How does that sound?"