

## “A Life of Prayer”

A Sermon by Willie VanDoren

Based on Luke 9:28-36

Jesus usually prayed on the mountain alone. At numerous points in the Gospels we find Jesus breaking away from the crowds, and leaving his own disciples, in order to have time alone with God. These are the prayers that no one saw – Jesus’ private communion with God, his secret sacred space apart from all other things of the world. How powerful, how wonderful must this private communion have been between the Son and the Father.

It seems that this was a major source of Jesus’ strength as a human being. He is renewed in his private prayer and receives the power and inspiration to carry out his public ministry. Indeed, just before his public ministry begins, we find Jesus alone in the wilderness in fasting and prayer. This is the beginning.

He also advises all of us to set apart time for private communion with God. “When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your father who is in secret, and your father who sees in secret will reward you.”<sup>1</sup> This is prayer apart from all the noise and business of the world, and apart from any appearances of piety for other people – this is for God alone. Certainly Jesus was speaking from his own experience, as the Gospels testify. Like Moses before him, Jesus meets God on the mountaintop, alone.

Yet this time – this time Jesus brings a select few to join him. Our Gospel

tells us that Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. Now leading up to this, he had been teaching them about the Kingdom of God in parables. He is about to reveal to them something very special in this regard. “Some of you will not taste death before you see the kingdom of God,” Jesus says. And then he shows them! He takes them up on the mountain and shows them the kingdom of God in a way that they had certainly never experienced. These disciples had seen his public works – healing the sick, feeding the masses, caring for the poor. These were certainly signs of the kingdom. Yet now he shows them something more intimate. His own prayer closet, as it were - he lets them into his secret sacred space, his private communion with God. This is the source of his strength. And the kingdom of God is alive in his prayers! Moses and Elijah are alive in his prayers! He is transformed before them, shining like the sun.

Jesus shows these disciples a glimpse of his higher consciousness, and his perfect relationship with God. He invites them to the mountaintop. *Do you know that he has also invited us?* To see the kingdom. To see with new eyes, a higher level of reality. To participate in Christ’s prayer, fully awake and aware. We are invited to the mountaintop to pray with Christ, to draw closer to spiritual mysteries; to recognize the kingdom of God in our midst, in our world, operating all around us in secret, as it were. We are called to go higher in the Spirit in each of our individual lives, to advance in our walk, and to participate in this body of Christ as it grows into maturity.

We hear this invitation coming out to us, to participate in the kingdom of

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<sup>1</sup> Matt 6:6

God. What then must we do to enter? How do we proceed?

Prayer is the beginning for us. We are called to a life of prayer, not only in our collective worship, but in the private moments of our individual lives – and in the secret space within us which no one else is able to see. Therefore make time for this private communion with God! Praying together is very important, and we are blessed with this opportunity every time we gather for church. Yet in addition to our collective worship, we are called to pray alone, even in secret. Jesus teaches us that the kingdom of God is unfolding in secret, all around us but unseen by the world. When we go into our prayer closet, we make ourselves available to the secret workings of the Spirit – we stand in the nakedness of our lonely being, with all our flaws and limitations, presenting ourselves before God in faith to commune with Him.

In the secret recesses of our being, the Kingdom of God may take root in us as individuals through prayer. And this Kingdom is not like a worldly kingdom, highly visible in the world, and ruling with worldly power and dominance. In Jesus' teaching, the kingdom of God may be the complete reversal of what we are expecting, in fact. Many people during his time were praying and hoping that the Messiah would come and usher in the Kingdom. What many of them had in mind was a restoration of David's kingship, and a political resistance that would expel the Roman occupation of Israel. Yet when Jesus comes, he does not express the kingdom of God in terms of an army overthrowing the Romans. It is rather, found in small and unexpected places. It is faith the size of a mustard seed. It is acts of charity done in secret, which no one else can see. This is not an easy teaching. Jesus is reorienting them, and all of us – his parables jar us into a different

way of viewing the will of God in our world. It is a completely different hierarchy of what's important, and it flips the values of the world on its head. In his day, they were expecting an army and he gave them a mustard seed. But this mustard seed would grow into the most sublime expression of God the world has ever seen.

So first of all, as we approach our prayer closet, or indeed, our collective prayer together – we can ask ourselves, what are we expecting? Will we be satisfied with the mustard seed? It takes faith to trust in the gifts of God, despite the fact that they are secret to the world and the world thinks they are foolish. May God help us in our prayer life, that even before we begin to pray we may let go of our worldly expectations about what God is supposed to do and what the Kingdom is supposed to look like. Whether we pray a little or a lot, no doubt all of us can go deeper in our practice. This may be the first step as we walk to meet Christ on the mountaintop.

Prayer is a powerful and mysterious thing. Often we wonder why some prayers seem to be answered and not others. There are no magic words or rituals we can do to ensure that God will give us what we want. Still, it may be that all of our prayers are heard and answered - just not always in the way we imagine. And sometimes, God makes it quite obvious that he has answered our prayer.

I'll never forget an experience I had several years ago, regarding a good friend of mine named Andrew. I became friends with Andrew while I was living in Eastern Michigan, during a very challenging time in my life. He became one of my best friends and really saw me through that difficult time.

Then at one point we went our separate ways, I moved to Brooklyn, NY and he stayed in Michigan. Unfortunately I lost touch with him – his phone number was disconnected and I couldn't figure out how to find him. It was on my heart, I was missing him and thinking about him a lot. So I started to pray about it regularly, that he was doing all right and that one day I might see him again.

Then one night in Brooklyn, my buddy Chris said he was going to get some pizza. I wasn't hungry, but suddenly I felt moved to do something nice for him: "I'll go get the pizza for you, don't worry about it". So I stepped out onto Fifth Avenue in Brooklyn, and as I was walking to the pizza spot, I heard a voice – "Willie?!" I turned around, and there was Andrew from Michigan on the streets of Brooklyn! It turned out he was just there for the weekend to visit someone. And I just knew that God had put it on my heart to go get that pizza for Chris – it was the answer to my prayer.

This was an amazing thing to me! And yet, if the prayer had been answered in a different way, which was less obvious, it would still be a special prayer, because I was sharing my heart with God. It is not the outcome of our prayers that makes them worth while. It is fine to pray for particular things and hopes, in fact we are called to do this. But first and foremost, in our prayer we should try to make ourselves available to God's will, before we ask God to do something for us. In the Lord's prayer, we begin by praising God: "hallowed be thy name". Then, "*your* kingdom come, *your* will be done". Not our own kingdom, but God's! If we can let go of our expectations and our attachments about the way things should go, we can approach our prayer with an openness that leads to genuine relationship with

God. This is the true reward and purpose of prayer. Then within that genuine relationship, we may express our hopes and needs, and we have faith that God hears us - in secret, as it were.

Second of all, we are called to share the gifts we receive in secret; to share them with each other in community, and to share them with the world.

Praying alone is important, but I do not mean to suggest that it can replace other parts of our practice, like gathering for fellowship and taking Holy Communion, for example. All of these things are important in our Christian walk. Indeed, when we cultivate our spiritual life alone, we have that much more to share when we come together. One thing that we can do in our everyday lives is invite others in, as Jesus did, into this most intimate space between ourselves and God – to pray with those who are most close to us, pray in small groups, pray with family and friends and loved ones. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” Jesus says.

I know sometimes its scary to pray in front of people, even people you are close to. Whether it’s a sort of fear of public speaking, or a reluctance to share something very intimate, this can hold us back in our prayer life. I have felt that way before. May God help us in this! May we be more bold and even courageous in our desire to share prayer with others. We may even have a breakthrough in our relationship with God – and with other people – simply by taking a little more initiative.

How will we respond to Jesus' invitation to approach the mountaintop? We have begun to go deeper in our prayer life, privately and together. Finally, Jesus requires one more thing of us. And this is perhaps the most difficult:

that we are detached from the things of the world. In the Gospel of Luke, just before Jesus takes the disciples to the mountaintop, he warns them about attachments. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” He even tells them that he himself will undergo great suffering and be killed - that he is prepared to give up his own life for the sake of the Kingdom. This is not what they were expecting! The Messiah, rejected by the religious elders and executed as a criminal! To find the Kingdom, you must be detached from what you were expecting. You must be detached from things in the world that you like and even love. To enter the Gates of the Kingdom, we can’t carry anything with us!

This is a difficult teaching. There are many things in the world that I love and I am attached to. How do I let go of them in my spirit? Am I actually wrong for enjoying things in the world?

One object of attachment that is mentioned throughout the Gospels, is money. This is a worthy example for our meditation. I believe that's something we all struggle with, whether we have a little or a lot. Money may make our lives more comfortable, even more enjoyable perhaps. But it gives us nothing in the Spirit. Jesus even says, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for one who is rich to get to the Kingdom of God”! A difficult teaching indeed. I don't believe that God despises money. Money's just an object, it's indifferent. But it's our attachment to money that is the problem. I've been attached to money even when I've had none – thinking if only had so many dollars, I'd be happy. But when we make money more important than our spiritual life, we are

separated from the Kingdom. This is not easy, especially in this world that revolves around money. Who can help us in our weakness in this regard? God can! For God all things are possible. But we need to acknowledge our weakness and ask Him for help, that we may have a peace in our hearts regardless of the rise and fall of bank accounts, or the so called security of a job.

This goes for anything else we may be attached to - ultimately, even our own lives! We should not put anything above God, but still God will help us in our weakness! Prayer is at the beginning, middle and end of our spiritual path. Indeed, it is said that even in heaven we may be praying and praising God.

The secrets and mysteries of God are all around us, though the world does not see it! The kingdom of God is here. Moses and Elijah and all the saints are here, alive in Christ's prayer which has become our prayer. Let us pay no heed to what the world finds important, but rather rest in our faith as we make steps toward the mountaintop. There we will find not only Christ transfigured, but ourselves transformed, filled with the life and the light of God which has no end. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.