

Homily – August 12th and 13th 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time



As you know, there are many forms of prayer; one is not any better than another. Public, communal prayer is called liturgy, while private prayer is called devotional prayer. We need both. Different forms of prayer spontaneously emerge in us depending on the circumstance we find ourselves in. When you stand before something absolutely wonderful, and you know you didn't create it, a "prayer of praise" is never too

far from your lips. Looking into a baby's eyes always elicits a prayer of praise within me; there's nothing more beautiful. There are also "prayers of thanksgiving" that arise in us when something good goes our way or when we ponder the sheer givenness of life itself. You just want to say, "Thank you, God." Eucharist, which means "to give thanks" is the ultimate, communal prayer of thanksgiving. Another form of prayer is silent "meditation," where you just sit in the presence of God with no agenda and you know that is enough. This is the prayer the prophet Elijah landed on in that first reading. He didn't find God in the sound and light show provided by a great wind, or the earthquake, or the fire. Instead, he found God in the sound of sheer silence.

Of course, the most common form of prayer, among the many, is the prayer of petition or the prayer of asking. During Mass we have the prayers of petition, prayers of asking; we call them the "general intercessions" or simply the "prayers of petition." When we are children, and know nothing about formal prayers, we spontaneously know how to ask our parents for things. Naturally, we project on to God our needs and learn to call on God in the same way we once turned to our parents. When you were really young, before you could even speak, for all intents and purposes, your father was God and your mother was the queen of heaven and earth. Again, when we were really young, we saw God (and our parents) as a gumball dispenser—you put your quarter in and you expected the answer to your prayer to come sliding down the shoot right into your hands.

When we are up to our necks with life's difficulties, when life becomes overwhelming, all prayer comes down to one word: HELP! Or, to quote Peter, in today's gospel story: "**Lord, save me!**" Before Peter says this, let's back the story up a little and see what this story has to teach us about prayer.

The opening line in today's gospel is, "**Immediately after feeding the crowd with the five loaves and two fish, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat...**" This is the tipoff that whatever happened at the feeding of the multitude is going to be key to this story on the boat as well. If you recall, in the story of the feeding of the multitude, there was lots of anxiety, stress and panic

when the Apostles saw the hungry crowd of 5,000 and their meagre resource of five loaves of bread and two fish. We learned from that story, that wherever Jesus is present, including this very moment in your life, there is only abundance; nothing is scarce. The Apostles, on the boat that was being battered by the waves, quickly forgot this. When we open to God in prayer, we open to the one and true God, the God of abundance. The god of scarcity doesn't exist.

Louis Evely, a once-popular spiritual writer in the 1960s and 1970s, wrote that God always answers our prayers by first refusing them. This is certainly the case in my life. Why does God first refuse prayer before eventually answering prayer? Because God wishes to give us much more than we are willing to receive. God wants us to ask for the big stuff, the enduring stuff, the stuff that will transform our lives. Asking for little red wagons will always be refused. It's too small, and it's almost an insult to God who wants to give you so much more.

Notice Peter's prayer in today's gospel. Peter, along with the others, not only has to deal with a storm at sea, but to make things worse, a ghost is coming towards them on the water. This is the worst time for a ghost to appear. And here comes one of the most brilliant prayers ever prayed in the history of Christianity. Peter says, "**Lord, if it's you** (and not a ghost), **command me to come to you on the water.**" In other words, "Ask me the big stuff. A ghost would never ask me to walk on water, but you would. Your faith in me, as the song goes, is only a shadow of my faith in you." Peter didn't ask for the little stuff in life, like a life jacket. That prayer would have been rejected because it would have been too small. God is not interested in little red wagons or in life jackets. The real God, and not the phantom god, is the One who wants you to ask for the big stuff in life and delights in giving it to you. Notice Peter asks for the big stuff, the impossible stuff. He asks the Lord to beckon him to walk on water, and Jesus delights in this big ask and gives Peter the ability to do so. What's the problem with most of us in our relationship to one another? We ask little of each other, we expect little, and voila, we get little. Then we make the mistake of transferring that onto God, and so we ask little of God, we expect little of God, and we wonder why we get so little.

You all remember the story we hear during Lent of how Jesus raises a man, Lazarus, from the dead. It's another classic case of God refusing prayer initially in order to grant a better prayer later. In the raising of Lazarus story, word came to Jesus that his friend Lazarus was seriously ill and about to die. Although Jesus was only two miles from Bethany, the hometown of Lazarus, Jesus deliberately waited two more days before deciding to go to Bethany and see what he could do for Lazarus. When he finally gets there, he is scolded first by Martha and then by Mary, Lazarus' sisters. Lazarus has been dead in the tomb for four days, while Jesus seemingly dilly-dallied his way there. Both Martha and Mary give Jesus a blast using the same words, "**If you had been here** (and not dilly-dallied), **my brother would not have died.**" Notice what their prayer was and notice how Jesus answered their prayer. He answered their prayer by first refusing their prayer. He doesn't give Martha and Mary what they wanted; he gives them so much more. Jesus

delayed his visit by two days, just long enough for Martha and Mary to die to what they had asked. They asked that Jesus would have arrived in time to prevent death from happening to their brother. Jesus isn't interested in a prayer that small. He wants them to ask for the big stuff. He came for the big stuff, not the little stuff. He came not to prevent death; we're all going to die someday. He came to transform death into life. He's not interested in helping us stave off death for a little bit longer. He's interested in destroying death forever. Jesus rejects Martha and Mary's prayer, a prayer for preventative medicine and instead grants a deeper prayer within them, a prayer for resurrection.

When you pray, ask for the impossible. Ask Jesus to help you walk on water. Don't ask for a life jacket. When you pray, pray to the one who says, "I am the Resurrection." Don't pray to someone who can give you medication over the counter to stave off illness or death. Pray to the only One who can transform everything that feels like death in you, into resurrection.

Why does God first refuse prayer? Because we ask for so little. But take heart. When you don't know what to ask, the Holy Spirit asks for you, with groans that cannot be put into words (Romans 8:26).

Fr. Phil