

The Rev. Daren J. Zehnle
Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois
10 August 2008

The Nineteenth Sunday of the Year (A)

There is something immensely calming about gazing out over the waters of the sea. Sitting on the shore, looking out over the immensity of the waters brings with it a profound peace and a realization of our own smallness. As the waters extend to the vastness of the horizon, one seems to look out into eternity where worries and concerns vanish and all that matters is the present moment.

When it comes down to it, the sea seems to beckon us, calling us to enter into the waters. Who can resist the temptation to at least get their feet wet? But we also know that these same waters can be frightening. In this way, the waters are like prayer.

When we look at someone praying - truly praying - we see a person at peace, one caught up in the present moment, one who has not simply gotten his feet wet but who has taken a plunge. Seeing such a person beckons us, like the water, to enter into prayer ourselves. But if prayer is so attractive, why are so few people truly men and women of prayer? It is because prayer is also frightening.

What happens in authentic prayer? Pope Benedict XVI recently described prayer in these words:

In prayer we open ourselves to the One who is the origin and foundation of our hope. The prayerful person is never totally alone for God is the One who in every situation and in any trial is always able to listen to and help him/her. Through perseverance in prayer the Lord broadens our desires and expands our mind, rendering us better able to receive him within ourselves.¹

This is why prayer is both inviting and troubling.

When you first step into the ocean you encounter the shore break where the waters are strong and even violent. If you are not careful and alert the waves may well knock you down and carry you away. These very same waters that from the shore seemed tranquil and serene are now powerful and frightening. But if you allow the waves to carry you, if you trust the waves, so to speak, they will carry you to calm waters just beyond the shore break, where all you need do is bounce and bob with the waves.

In this way, prayer is similar to the ocean. Prayer, like the water, is at first appearance calm and inviting, opening up into a vast expanse. And yet, when you first step into prayer, as it were, it becomes something uncomfortable and even frightening, precisely because it is a purification. What do I mean?

Entering into prayer requires that we first withdraw from the distractions that surround us and enter into silence. This is why Jesus "went up on the mountain by himself to pray"

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Ecclesial Convention of the Diocese of Rome, 9 June 2008.

(Matthew 14:23). In the words of Saint John Chrysostom, Jesus went alone

to teach us that solitude and seclusion are good... we find him continually withdrawing into the wilderness... For the wilderness is the mother of silence; it is a calm and a harbor, delivering us from all turmoils.²

This is why silence is the beginning of prayer, the invitation to prayer. This is why prayer is inviting.

But not many of us like silence these days, preferring the constant buzz of the computer or fan, or the constant sounds of the iPod or television. We often find silence deafening. We seemingly do all that we can to remove silence from our lives without realizing that doing so takes us further from authentic joy and peace.

Why do we run from silence? We do so for the very same reason that prayer, when first entered into, seems daunting and frightening.

Entering into silence we are left alone with our thoughts, thoughts open to the Lord. We become aware that we are not, in fact, alone, and thus we begin to enter into prayer.

Prayer, dialogue with the Lord, is, as we have said, at first inviting. But the longer we are in his presence, the longer we speak with and listen to him, the more aware we become of our sin. We see the depth of his great love for us and the

² Saint John Chrysostom, *Homily on the Gospel of Matthew*, 50.1 (), 36.

many ways in which we have failed to return his love. We see the many times that we have failed to trust him and have tired to govern our own lives.

The reality of our lack of love disturbs us, makes us uncomfortable, and sometimes makes us want to flee from his presence. It is at this moment, as it were, that we find ourselves at the shore break, at that place where prayer becomes frightening and alarming, at that place where we need to exercise the fear of the Lord, the fear that leads to love.

Pope Benedict XVI put it this way:

The correct way to pray is, therefore, a process of inner purification. We must open ourselves to God's gaze, to God himself so that, in the light of God's Face, lies and hypocrisy fall away. This manner of exposing oneself in prayer to God's Face is really a purification that renews us, sets us free and opens us not only to God but also to our brothers and sisters.³

It is here that we all too often turn our gaze from Jesus Christ and focus on our sin. As we do so, we fail to see and to seek his mercy and love, we refuse to be purified by him and so we begin to sink into the waters. It is here that we must cry out with Saint Peter, "Lord, save me" (Matthew 14:30)!

In some way, such a cry is necessary, for "God cannot change things without our conversion, and our true conversion

³ Pope Benedict XVI, Address, 9 June 2008.

begins with the 'cry' of the soul imploring forgiveness and salvation."⁴

This cry is a recognition of our dependence on the love and mercy of Christ. It is a recognition that we are sinners, that we cannot save ourselves, that we need to be in relationship with the Lord.

We see, then, that Jesus does not ignore Peter's request. "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him" (Matthew 14:31); he will do the same with us. He will stretch out his hand - just one strong, powerful hand - and lift us out of the waters. He will raise us back into his presence and say to us, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt" (Matthew 14:31). "Why did you doubt my love? Why did you doubt my mercy?"

Catching us in his hand he will lift us out of the terrifying waters and place us just beyond the shore break, where the waters are calm and prayer is fruitful. We will experience the grace of his love and mercy and be purified by him.

This is the purpose of prayer. Prayer is not simply about asking the Lord to fix all of our problems. It is primarily about being in relationship with Christ, developing a friendship with him and becoming like him. The deeper a friendship grows,

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 21 October 2007.

the more two friends become like each other. It is the same between the believer and Christ.

Let each of us, then, not be afraid to step into the waters of prayer; let us not be afraid to be carried away by them! Let us allow the hand of Jesus to carry us to that place of safety where we can listen to him, imitate him and be purified by him. Amen.