Prayer for a Way of Unity

Kent Beduhn  
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Texts:

Luke 3: 15-21

**15**The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. **16**John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **17**His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” **18**And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

**19**But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, **20**Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

**21**When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened **22**and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

1 Thessalonians 3:8-13

8 For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. 9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. 12 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Both the Epistle and Gospel of today’s lectionary scriptures have some surprising connections, which relate directly to prayer. They reflect, on this Epiphany Sunday, *expectation*, *resilience despite persecution* and *love* with one another and with God.  We celebrate today the arrival of the Wise Ones to pay tribute to Jesus. So, there is a new expectation of light as Jesus arrives. Things will never be the same again.

In both our scripture passages, there is an energy of *expectation*.  People were “waiting expectantly” as John preached, wondering whether he might be the Messiah. John tells the people he’s baptizing with water, and points to the one who will “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and Fire.”   So also, in Thessalonians, Paul expresses the expectation of news from the return of Timothy to Athens from Thessalonica, and the amazing news of the Thessalonians’ “standing” in the Lord.  Just before this, Paul overflows with deep gratitude expressed for “all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you.”

It has become remarkable how God’s presence meets us in our Zoom gatherings, and how we, too, have a deep gratitude expressed for it all.  In spite of Paul and Jesus’ disciples having suffered persecutions, Paul celebrates, the “joy we have in the presence of our God because of YOU.” Paul is also excited about the expectation of the return of Jesus. Historically, the letter to the Thessalonians is the first epistle written at a time when Christians expected Jesus would return.  Time itself would change and everything would be different. The phrase “standing firm in the Lord” is powerful because it depicts a military guard, expectantly standing watch for what is about to come.

A second theme the Gospel and Epistle share is *resilience despite persecution*. In the Gospel, John accepts that an essential part of his prophetic ministry is to rebuke powers and principalities, who are represented by Herod Antipas. John’s consequence was being locked up and murdered. Earlier in Thessalonians, Paul sees the forces working against his mission to spread Good News and start communities of faith as Satanic, persecutions born of the work of evil. The attachment to the Thessalonians is intense, which Paul expresses being “torn away,” having “intense longing for you,” sending Timothy because, as Paul says twice in prior passages, he could “stand it no longer.”   Paul passionately describes the quality of his attachment and love for the community before our passage for today, “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, YOU are our glory and joy!"  The Word Paul and his fellow disciples shared with the Thessalonians was accepted as “God’s Word,” “urging and encouraging” “and pleading” that they “live a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”

We also are, in fact, also separated from one another as a community—who has found new ways and technologies to connect through, though we only rarely see one another face-to-face. Separation is heavy for many. As a therapist, I view how it worsens mental and emotional distress, loneliness, fragmentation and anger at others. It feels like a real loss of our connection to one another. Our attachment to one another gives us resilience. Paul’s attachment to the Thessalonians gave them resilience and strength, even in persecution or separation.

A third theme that jumps out in both of these lectionary scriptures is *Heart*. Following Luke’s description of John’s imprisonment, Jesus’ own baptism is described, where Jesus is in prayer and “the Holy Spirit descended upon him on bodily form like a dove.”  And then the Voice from Heaven — “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”   This experience of *Belovedness*, being deeply loved and cherished, is more than a thought or concept, more than a bodily experience, but ultimately it’s engagement of the Heart. The “Heart” in Biblical terms of Paul’s Thessalonians is not just a “warm feeling” or “emotional reaction,” as heart is used culturally in American English. The *Heart*, or *kardia*, in the Greek New Testament, is the reference to the center of judgment and discernment, decision and understanding.  It’s like the consciousness of where “right decision” comes from. This is what Paul’s urging his community to strengthen in his 3-part prayer:

“Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so *strengthen your hearts* in holiness that you may be blameless before our and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints

“Strengthen your hearts” refers to this center of decision, discernment and understanding. Three requests are made in this brief prayer:

* that God may direct them ‘home’ to them at Thessalonica, for unity;
* an increase and abounding in love—for one another and for all, and
* that you fulfill the goal of a Christian life, growing in your “holiness,” or likeness to Jesus and God.

Paul likely has the whole scene of Meeting Jesus at the end of time, in his own heart and mind, when we will join all who have died as we engage Jesus.

So, these 3 strong themes: *Expectation, Resilience despite Persecution* and *Heart Connection* stand out in both of these passages. How does prayer help us to practice all of these to keep us united with God and each other?

Prayer literally fueled and revealed Jesus’ entire life and ministry in God. The heart-to-heart prayer Jesus practiced with his “Daddy” was revealing of the heart connection we can also experience with God and one another.  Prayer was the ultimate transformative agent for Paul’s confrontation of the demonic and the foundation for his invitation of the Holy Spirit. Prayer gave Peter and Paul the strength to light the fire of the Holy Spirit in the earliest churches. Both Jesus and Paul built *expectations*, *confronted the violence and persecution* of their times with *resilience,* and expanded the *consciousness of the heart* with prayer.

We are called to practice the same intimate approach to God as they did. It’s a process of expressing attachment and connection, the same way an infant learns to experience awareness of itself and the world; we need to develop trust in God through prayer.

We live in an extremely violent time. Fully 31% of Americans in a poll last Friday (shockingly) reported they would be willing to take up arms against the United States Federal Government. It is days past the first anniversary of the attack on our Capitol, and ever before us echo questions as to whether Democracy in America will actually survive. We hear a constant stream of invitations to be Right or Wrong, to stand in opposition, and it is a set-up for further violence. William Butler Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming,” written just prior to the outbreak of World War I, seems to resonate here:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Our Christianity has not escaped this violent division and corrosive right/wrong or good/bad attitude. We are *at* each other, rather than *for and with* one another.  I quote Richard Rohr, at some length here, from his book *The Universal Christ*.

The either-or mind, the explainers of the differences and the reasons for separation, have won our churches, institutions and pulpits. People who experienced Christ in a uniting, more mystical way have been marginalized by the church, or made into Saints (after their death), and observed from a distance where they could be contained and packaged, where they are no longer a threat.

We have “domesticated” the radical nature of what Jesus provided us, and Paul encouraged, and what Jesus represented in Christ to transform reality. Argumentative, institutional Christianity set us on a wrong, false track, making sense of Jesus in a strictly rational (mental) way, as an idea, or as a God that Empire could make use of. It seems we could not tolerate another view, the universalizing the life and ministry of Jesus Christ who transformed all flesh (John 1:14) and all creation (Romans 8:18-23). There’s no room for sinners and outsiders.

Our small minds and lives needed a “domestic Jesus,” who could be used for ethnic purposes.

This is the [universal] Jesus is described always in the first chapters of John, Colossians, Ephesians, Hebrews and 1John, and in the writings of the Early Eastern Fathers, as well as many mystics throughout the church’s history.

These writers processed reality differently from us: We need to redeem ourselves to a Cosmic notion of Christ and a contemplative way of knowing, that must come to the rescue. It’s a reconciling notion of Christ and a non-tribal notion of Jesus. It’s not just ill will that keeps us from the Gospel, but a lack of mindfulness, and a [lack of] capacity for Presence, that kept us from bringing the radicality of Jesus’ message to issues like Power, Money, or War, of course.

The binary [--dividing in two] mind finds itself out of its league in describing things of ultimate importance: Love, Death, Infinity, God, Sexuality or Mystery in general. It keeps limiting reality to two options and thinks it is smart because it chooses one. This is no exaggeration; the two alternatives are always exclusionary. Usually in an angry way, things are either totally right or totally wrong. You’re With Me or Against Me, Male or Female, Democrat or Republican, Christian or Pagan, on and on and on. The two-sided mind provides quick security and false comfort, but never wisdom. It thinks it is smart because it counters your idea with an opposing idea; there is not usually much room for a reconciling third. I see this tendency in myself every day as I judge, react, take sides, form opinions.

But it is not WHAT we know but How we Know (epistemology), that informs a broader, contemplative stance on what is real and true.”   (From  Chapter 16, “Transformation and Contemplation” in, The Universal Christ­, Richard Rohr)

So, before we decide which side we’re on in the next Civil War, I would like to offer a non-oppositional way, a way of unity, to approach people and situations that has helped me to be a vessel of positive change in my own and other people’s lives for many years. This makes us more like the “Wise Ones” coming to the cradle of Jesus to pay honor and give the gift of our presence to God’s presence.

Surely, we have expectation, coming together as we have over Zoom, of seeing one another, but we long to see one another face-to-face. Surely, the oppression and persecution of COVID restrictions or illness has separated us, but we have certainly found ways to resiliently “go deeper” with one another’s encouragement and holding one another in our hearts. May our hearts discern a “third way” of seeing what’s real and true when we feel distance or conflict, when it seems as if it must be one way or another. May we include ways of seeing the whole picture, so as to include, integrate, and to move toward reconciliation and forgiveness, even where that seems difficult or impossible.

I share with you today at the encouragement of several people from our faith community, both personal and shared observations about spiritual practices. The one prayer practice I find helpful is the type of quiet, inner prayer, contemplative prayer. Just as one prays when they begin contemplative prayer, I ask for your consent, and my consent, for God’s presence to be known and experienced in this sharing. As Thomas Merton mentions, no one is more shy or should be more reluctant about sharing their experience of prayer than a contemplative mystic, which is the kind of prayer I have been gifted by grace to experience. I share only because I know a number of you have found it valuable when I have shared my experience, and that you hunger for more of this unity in your own prayer life. May you find similar grace in the openings to God’s presence and work in your personal and shared experience of prayer.

 A personal story of transformative prayer

 I began a prayer session on one of our 8th Day Silent Retreats more than 20 years ago, Saturday afternoon right after lunch, just before Easter.  This was our usual format of entering into the Great Silence on Friday evening after dinner, so the context of nearly 24 hours of quiet proceeded this experience. I prepared myself for this extended period of prayer, as I usually do, with the Prayer of Abandonment, by Charles de Focauld.  So, please join your intention and heart with mine in a spirit of prayer. As you feel comfortable, close your eyes and experience with me what I share. Please pray with me now, as I offer the Prayer of Abandonment:

 Lord, I abandon myself into your hands.

Do with me what you will.

Whatever you do, I thank you.

I am ready for all, I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me

  And in all your creatures.

I wish no more than this, O Lord.

For I love you, Lord, for I love you, Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul.

I offer it to you

With all the love, the love of my heart.

And so need to surrender myself,

  To surrender myself into your hands without reserve,

For I love you, Lord,

And with boundless confidence.

*For* you are my God. For *you* are my God.

For you *are* my God. For you are my *God*.

 I gazed gently at the candle lit before me, “breathe in the Light,” I told myself, “breathe out the Love.”   Consciously focusing on only bringing the Light towards and into my heart center on the in-breath and radiating back out that Light in God’s Love on the out-breath. Deeply, slowly, breathing into that mantra, consciously bringing my full concentration back to those thoughts and feelings whenever mind wandered or physical sensations or other experiences interfered. They were all opportunities to gently guide my attention and awareness back to the Light and Love. Offering conscious consent, I set an intention: “Let God be known in the Light,” and “Let God be known in the Love,” I allowed my awareness to move downward and inward, as Rumi says, “flow down and down, in ever-widening circles of being.” (Rumi, Jelaluddin. *The Big Red Book: The great Masterpiece Celebrating Mystical Love and Friendship.*  Trans. Coleman Barks. New York: Harper Collins, 2011.)

 Before long, I was experiencing changes in my heart, as my mind and body calmed and centered and deepened. I have learned to center my attention in my bodily sensations, internally and in my skin, through body scans, and use of the breath for centering. At some point, without knowing how long it could have been, I experienced my whole being of my body enlarged and expanded by a sense of light within, radiating through my whole body. It was as if a slow but steady pressure of Light and Love was building from within with each breath.  Soon after, without knowing how long it could have been, I experienced my being brimming with the love of God, as light, now radiating out from me as breath and as waves of Light and Love. For some unknowable reason, I was weeping silent tears pouring from my eyes with each out-breath of Love.  At some timeless moment after that, I felt as if I had no body, but only remained a suspended breathing awareness, ever-conscious of light and love, suspended in space with boundaries dispersed everywhere by radiant awareness.   This state continued for a long time, but eventually flowed into a state of immense peace and goodness, well-being and calm. There I remained, suspended and vastly still, enlarged by boundarylessness, but emptied by the Spirit of utter Peace. There was no thought, no body, no desire, no feeling, no self, but in what can only be described in process terms: Deep Rest, Fully Awake, Content Bliss. I hung there, suspended for immeasurable moments, for a timeless very long pause in time-space.

 There was this long, timeless, open space where I was held, love, fully aware of God’s abiding and endless love. What’s remarkable about this is to me, now recollecting, is that there was Nothing to do, express, feel, record or understand—but only the “BEing within God.”  Very gradually, after this very “long time” which was also very short, I began to notice my breath again, and repeated the mantra, then gradually seeing the candle lit before me, then my body and the room I was in.   Continuing to collect myself, very gradually, I became aware of my breathing again, breathing In Light and Out Love, noticing again I felt connected to my body and awareness of boundary changes as I breathed. The candle before me appeared brighter, and I noticed the whole room had become darkened. I looked out the window and the sun was down, as it was fully dark. How long had I been there? I slowly began to re-orient, doing some slow stretches and breaths. I washed my face, streaked with long-dried tears. I paused and looked into my eyes and saw all the way into another part of my soul, one saturated with Light and Love, and it somehow took me very briefly back into that deeper state of awareness. I saw glimpses of the Light and Love of God. I started to cry again.  I dried my face and turned from the mirror.

 Postscript

I left my Dayspring room and walked slowly down the path to the Lodge of the Carpenter: Apparently dinner had long-since happened, all were asleep, and most of the lights were out. No one was there. Did I pray right through the dinner bell and dinner hour? Was that the nature of the deeper attention I was graced within? I was not hungry, but had a little snack, and not really thirsty but had a couple glasses of water. I was at peace. I went back to my room and had the best night’s sleep I had had in years, complete peace and quiet, depth restoration. I awoke with expectant and deep joy.