

Spiritual Practice for February 2021 – Praying Our Experiences (Part2)

When I was a child growing up in the Episcopal Church, there was a season of the church year called “Pre-Lent.” It was a kind of run-up to the major penitential season, and in fact one of the Scripture readings was St. Paul’s exhortation to run the race for the heavenly prize (I Cor. 9:24). I didn’t feel then the discomfort I sometimes now feel when I know Lent is at hand. I feel that way when I think that Lent means I have to get serious about my life in God, as in “time to buckle down and study, the test is tomorrow.”

Honestly reflecting on one’s life experiences and offering them up to God, the “bad” as well as the “good,” is not easy – especially those thoughts, intentions, and actions we’d rather avoid looking at. It’s the call we associate with Lent, but really it’s one we should heed every day. The practice of praying our experiences, which was introduced last month, is one way to answer that call.

In the past year we as a nation have been confronted with the ongoing reality of racism, a reality that many of us who are privileged by virtue of our skin color would like to ignore, excuse, or deny. This is the ego writ large, and it reveals the trap that we as individuals of any race can fall into when we consider our lives through the lens of daily experience.

An example from my own life may ring true for you. Earlier this week I said something to my husband in an accusatory tone. When he pointed that out to me I denied it at first, maintaining the problem was in his perception, but on later reflection I had to admit he was right. It was harder to admit that to myself than to him. It ran counter to my own ego-image of moral rectitude. But as I prayed with this more, I saw a deeper thing at work – *I was afraid to admit my imperfection because then I would not be deserving of God’s love and acceptance.* At one level I recognize that God loves me exactly as I am, but at another level, I grope for the faith to truly believe it.

Perfectionism is my particular issue, and it may not be yours. But at some time or another, we all shy away from self-knowledge – we refuse to recognize the evil we do, and sometimes even the good. Whenever that’s the case, we limit how God can act in our lives. Fr. Schmidt, writing in *Praying Our Experiences*, uses the example of St. Paul to show the relation of praying *all* our experiences to self-offering and transformational grace:

St. Paul spoke of glorying in his weaknesses. He had reached a depth of self-knowledge that permitted him to understand that his righteousness consisted not in freedom from weakness and sin but in being able to say yes to his entire life and his whole self.... Paul offered his total self to God, not only what he would like to be, but what in truth he was. Offering ourselves in truth is the offering that God asks and that forms the basis of prayer.

Praying our experiences is a way into this depth of self-knowledge and acceptance. As we unfold our experiences and become aware of our blessedness and our brokenness, we begin to become more aware of the God who can fill all of our life with graciousness.

May we – may our country – have the courage to pray our experiences.