
The Implications of Easter⁽²⁾

"Somebody's There"

John 20:1-10

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A self-professed agnostic, author, poet and playwright Julia Cameron concluded that she was probably just being *"spiritually lazy."* As she put it, she hadn't really *"drawn the dignified conclusion of nonbelief."* She hadn't taken the time *"to do the research"* for herself (3). And so while announcing to God that she still didn't officially *"believe in Him"* (5) and that she wasn't trying to become God's *"new best friend"* (6), she was nevertheless going to give the God hypothesis a chance. As she put it, she was *"going to (start) showing up and see what happens in relationship to God"* (3).

And by the time she was done Julia confessed, *"Alright. I have opened up the door. I have not seen a burning bush, but, maybe I have put out the lit cigarette of cynicism that was smoldering in the sofa of my consciousness. And maybe I have seen the flicker of something higher and brighter – a little like a firefly: now you see it, now you don't. (And) that's faith, I suppose, (or at least) some tiny start on it"* (123). Julia Cameron began by trying to *"to establish contact"* with God. And when she was done she said that it turned out to be *"as simple as flicking a light switch... You have to do it, but it's not so hard"* (120).

Is that how you think about prayer – *"not so hard... simple as flipping a switch"*? Probably not. To paraphrase what Paul said about the Law in Romans chapter 7 and apply it to prayer – *"I know I need to pray; I even want to pray more and better; and so I read books and attend seminars on prayer; but I never quite seem to get around to praying with any consistency or depth."* Somehow what should be the most spontaneous and natural activity of our spiritual lives routinely becomes complicated and burdensome.

Now, not once in her spiritual experiment did Julia ever even come close to embracing organized religion in general, or Christianity in particular. As she put it, she was unwilling to *"risk a God Expert."* She said she found most religious leaders to be confusing, quarrelsome and contradictory. *"Can't you see how unattractive your system is?"* she told God. *"They make you out to be something like the Wizard of Oz, a grand poobah behind the screen, accessible only through lackeys and toadies. Couldn't you have come up with something better?"* (33).

And the *"better"* Julia gradually discovered was an honest, unmediated, unhindered talk with God about anything and everything that occurred to her. There was no false pretense; no slick religious veneer; no stilted piety; just a direct and sometimes even blunt conversation with God. And as I read about this

evolving agnostic's faith awakening this week, I kept thinking to myself that she was actually praying like we who are Christians say we want to. There was nothing stiff, formal, rote or regulated in Julia Cameron's visits with God. She spoke from her heart and found that God was there patiently listening.

Eugene Peterson knows this kind of God too. He likes to say that "*God hears anything we whisper or shout, say or sing. Right words and correct forms are not prerequisite to a heavenly audience. God is not fastidious in these matters*" (3). And that's because Biblically prayer is about a relationship not a ritual. It doesn't require technical knowledge; it just requires some time. As Julia put it, you've just got to show up and then see what happens (3). Biblically, I think this is what the author of Hebrews meant when he wrote that "*whoever would approach God must believe that God exists and that God rewards those who seek God*" (11:7). Prayer is just that simple. But let's face it, we don't always like simple.

For instance, what's your opinion of the hymn "*In the Garden*"? It's #227 in the Chalice Hymnal. You might want to grab a copy and take a look. This is one of those devotional standards in the church. You can almost always count on it being sung at funerals. And occasionally it will even be sung in church as a prayer hymn. But when it is we just barely tolerate it rather than enthusiastically embrace it. And that's because it's sweet and sentimental, and almost too simplistic for our sophisticated souls.

Do you have your hymnals open to it? Take a quick look at the section of the hymnal that it's in. You'll find the reference on the upper right hand corner of page 228. "*Resurrection and Exaltation*" is what it says. Now, most of the hymnals on the worship shelf in my library put "*In the Garden*" in the prayer and devotion section of their collections. But the editors of the Chalice Hymnal put "*In the Garden*" in the Easter section. Does that surprise you? It shouldn't, for you see "*In the Garden*" was originally written to be an Easter hymn.

"*In the Garden*," both its words and its music were written by C. Austin Miles. It was inspired by the first resurrection story found in the Gospel of John – Mary Magdalene's visit to the Garden Tomb early Easter Sunday morning while it was still dark – our Scripture lesson this morning (20:1-10). "*In the Garden*" was written as C. Austin Miles was sitting in his study one day quietly meditating on this story. As he did, he said that he felt as if he had been drawn into the scene. He said he became a witness in his imagination to the arrival of Mary at the tomb, and to her weeping when she found it to be empty. He said that he watched as she turned to the one she thought was a gardener, and listened as she asked if he had taken her master's body and where he had put it. And he said that he felt something of her joyful surprise when the gardener called her by name and she realized that it was Jesus!

"*In the Garden*" was written as an expression of Mary Magdalene's intensely personal encounter with the Risen Christ in the garden on that first Easter morning. You see, the use of the first person pronouns throughout this hymn – "*me*" and "*I*" - are not primarily references to you and me, but to Mary. But over time, this Easter hymn has become a popular prayer hymn because the quality of the relationship that Mary had with the Risen Christ on that first Easter

Sunday morning is the quality of the relationship with the Risen Christ that is still available to each one of us sitting here today.

The second Biblical implication of the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the third day is that there really is somebody there listening to us when we pray. Christianity is not about agreeing with abstract doctrines, or performing precise rituals, or living by some kind of rigid moral code, it's about a vital relationship with a living Lord who is just as real as the person sitting next to you here in church this morning. And the way that a hymn originally written for Easter, "*In the Garden*," has become in popular usage a hymn about prayer simply points to the way that Christ's resurrection touches our everyday lives.

When we cry out to God, somebody's there listening. And the refrain of the hymn "*In the Garden*" is as good an introduction to the kind of simple and spontaneous prayer life that we all say we want.

- **It begins with the notion of companionship. It says, "*And He walks with me, and He talks with me.*"** The Bible opens with the wonderful picture of God coming to walk and talk with Adam and Eve through the Garden of Eden in the cool of the evening (Genesis 3:8). The image here is one of good friends relaxing together and enjoying the pleasure of each other's company. In the Westminster Confession, one of the defining statements of Reformed theology, the question: "*What is the purpose of man?*" gets answered with the marvelous phrase: "*To love God and enjoy God forever!*" And this is the Biblical foundation of prayer. God wants to spend time with us. In his little devotional classic "*My Heart - Christ's Home*," Robert Boyd Munger talked about how the Christian life can be imaginatively viewed as Jesus Christ moving into our homes, room by room. And one of the rooms he talked about was the living room. "*Intimate and comfortable,*" with "*a fireplace, overstuffed chairs, a sofa and a quiet atmosphere,*" Jesus said to Robert, "*This is a delightful place... let's come here often... so we can fellowship together.*" And so Jesus said, "*I'll be here early every morning; ...we will start the day together.*" And at first Robert said that he did, and the companionship he shared with Christ was rich and warm. But gradually, "*under the pressure of many responsibilities,*" Robert began to shorten the time that he spent with Christ, and then he began to skip it all together. And then one day, rushing to an important meeting, Robert said he quickly passed the living room and saw Christ sitting there by Himself quietly waiting. And when Robert apologized for his absence, Christ said, "*The trouble is... that you have been thinking of this quiet time... as a factor in your own spiritual growth, but you have forgotten that this time means something to me too.*" And Robert said that it was the discovery of this truth that did more to transform his spiritual life than any other single fact: God really wants to spend time with us.
- **The second element of the vital prayer life that this hymn effectively identifies for us is belonging. It says, "*And He tells me I am His own.*"** Author Frederick Buechner says that he can pinpoint the very moment when the Gospel of Jesus Christ finally broke through to his heart. He was taking

communion one Sunday morning at a church where he knew the minister quite well. As the minister distributed the bread to the communicants he would repeat over and over the phrase: *“The body of Christ; the bread of heaven.”* But when he got to him, on impulse the minister said, *“The body of Christ broken for you, Freddy, the bread of heaven offered to you.”* And Buechner writes –

For the first time in my life, it struck me that when Jesus picked up the bread at His last meal and said, “This is my body which is for you,: He was doing it not just in a ritual way... but in an unthinkably personal way for every particular man, woman or child, who ever existed or someday would exist. Most unthinkable of all: maybe He was doing it for me. (Rinehart 38)

In our own spiritual tradition as a church, Alexander Campbell, one of our founders, argued that we have not really grasped the significance of communion until when the symbols of bread and wine are put in our hands we hear the Lord saying to us individually: *“This is my body broken **for you**. This is my blood poured out **for you**”* (273).

- **And the third element of the vital prayer life that this hymn talks about is delight. It says that “the joy we share as we tarry there, no other has ever known.”** I was raised in a church that talked often about *“holy days of obligation.”* Now, I’m not sure that using the category of *“obligation”* has served my spiritual development very well. Jury duty is an obligation. Paying my taxes is an obligation. The annual physical exam by my doctor is an obligation. Working out at the “Y” three times a week is an obligation. An obligation is something that I know is the right thing to do. And so an obligation is something that I’ll usually do without much argument, but without much joy either. So is this really the right way to think about our relationship with God? Prayer isn’t something we should ever feel like we have to do; it should be something that we really want to do. And if that’s to happen, then we’re going to need to shift the focus from a sense of obligation to the experience of delight. David Wilkerson of *The Cross and the Switchblade* fame points out that the focus of so much of our praying is on material needs. He says that if we subtracted all petition from our praying there would be *“little or no prayer left”* in most of our lives (3). To correct this imbalance David urges a careful study of the word *“delight”* in Scripture. *“Delight”* is what a young couple feels in the first days of courtship. *“Delight”* is what parents feel when holding a newborn. *“Delight”* is what long separated family members and friends feel when reunited. *“Delight”* is the pleasure of simply being together. And the Bible says that we are God’s delight just as clearly as it says that God is to be our delight as well. There is joy in simply being together. I like the way that St. John Vianney put it. He said that there was a man in his parish who spent hours every day just sitting in the church staring at the altar. And when he finally asked that man what he was doing he simply

explained, *"I look at Christ; Christ looks at me; and we are happy."* That's delight, and it just may be the best kind of prayer of all.

The longer I do this church thing the more convinced I become that we have made things way too complicated and way too technical. One of the very first things that recovering agnostic Julia Cameron said in one of her very first prayers was a confession that she doubted she would do this right. *"I don't know how to do this right,"* she explained, *"But I think the fact that I am trying should count for something"* (1). And it does. Those who are seeking God put themselves in the very best position to be found by God. Why not try just showing up, and then see what happens?

Sources

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