Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“Strive to enter through the narrow gate” (Luke 13:23).

The words of St. Paul about prayer in Romans 8:26 are some of the most encouraging lines in all of Scripture: “The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes with inexpressible groanings.”

We are trying too hard. The Spirit knows the mind of God and knows what we really need. Our prayer is assured, for “all things work for good for those who love God.”

The art of prayer is not the art of the deal. Those who imagine they are successfully negotiating with God to get what they want are taking credit for their own prayers. But prayer is not like this. Prayer is not a “quid pro quo.” It a friendship with God, initiated by God and shared with us as a total gift. No one, no matter how virtuous, can claim eternal life with God as a reward. It surpasses all other blessings, grace upon grace, offered to saints and sinners alike by divine mercy. A humble, grateful heart, not a clever, calculating one, is how we access this gift.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus meets someone who is anxious about getting into heaven and wants to be sure he is among the chosen few. Jesus mirrors back his anxiety by speaking about a “narrow door” and saying that many self-assured people will not get in. All their credentials and connections will not be enough if the master of the house does not know “where they are from.”

Hearing the word is not enough. Only those who do the will of God will be recognized (cf. Matt 7:21). Another image from Jesus comes to mind. We recall the rich man who approached Jesus about salvation, then went away sad when Jesus invited him to sell his possessions. (Luke 18:18 ff). The disciples were shocked. Riches, they thought, were a sign that God had already blessed that man, but Jesus said that it was “harder for a rich man to enter the Kingdom than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.”

Every city wall had a main gate and a narrow one for after-hours entry. A late arrival with a loaded camel could only be admitted if the camel were stripped of its goods in order to fit through the narrow gate, called the “eye of the needle.” Thus, only by leaving behind all his wealth would the rich man be able to walk unencumbered into the Kingdom.

Which brings us back to St. Paul on prayer. It is only when we surrender ourselves to God’s mercy that the gift of prayer begins. Our exclusive encounter with God is focused, intimate and personal, and we can take nothing with us except our true self. Then, empty and humble, we will be filled with the Spirit and exalted in love.

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