

The Adventure-Love Story of Prayer

Learn to pray / Spirituality

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What is prayer? Some would say 'meditation', some 'speaking to God'. One side might emphasize talking, another, listening and receptivity. One could point out praise, and one could describe petition. All of these are correct, but only in the context that they are pieces of a bigger puzzle. Because, in the end, prayer is a relationship. And even more than that, prayer is a love story.

What constitutes a "love story?" Well, it also involves a relationship, an intimate one, between two people. There are secret notes exchanged, and silent gazes which only the two lovers recognize and understand. But in addition, what typical love story would be complete without a few...unexpected adventures. Mishaps. Bloopers. We've all seen a chick flick (I think) where, just as the two lovers are about to embrace, the boat flips over, ice cream drops in someone's lap, or the cell phone rings. And everyone watching in the theater groans because the perfect moment has been broken.

You might predict the groans, but in fact your reaction all depends on your perspective. You can groan... or you can laugh, and look back later with cheerful humor instead of frustration, because you challenge yourself to capture those moments as unexpected "adventures" instead of disasters.

If you really think about it, experiences of prayer are many times the same way. Doesn't it seem like just as we're about to reach a true stillness of soul or receive some revelation, the elderly lady behind you starts praying the rosary out loud, or the baby starts crying, or the cell phone rings? Our immediate reaction to these moments may very well be to groan and think, "Alas, I'll never be united to God as I desire!" or "These distractions must make me displeasing to God." However, there is, once again, another way to look at these situations.

Jesus isn't some distant, cold boss looking down on us from a big wooden desk with a checklist and giving us checks and strikes when we "do well" or "mess up" in our relationship with him. Oh no, he is very, very different from that. In fact, he's one of us! He is totally God but also completely human, with a human heart which beats faster when we approach him, with human hands and fingers which were surely stubbed by hammers while working in Joseph's carpenter shop, and with a human smile and laugh that can ring with genuine joy...or genuine mischief.

I've had many encounters with this more mischievous smile...which I will affectionately call "Jesus party crashers": those groaning moments which seem to come upon us so often in prayer. Rather shockingly, I have come to discover that those moments, contrary to popular belief, can actually draw us closer to Christ and not farther away from him.

One such moment occurred several weeks ago when I went to spend a morning helping the Missionaries of Charity prepare for a summer camp. Just before I left, I joined the sisters for their midday prayers. A few minutes into the beautiful vocal prayers, a gentle summer rain began to fall outside the chapel windows. I thought nothing of it, but I noticed that one of the sisters was beginning to fidget and look back and forth from the window to Sr. Edward. Suddenly the nervous sister got up and whispered something in Sr. Edward's ear. Suddenly the prayers stopped, and Sr. Edward turned to me, chuckling, and said, "Sorry, we'll be right back, our clothes are hanging outside to dry so we need to go bring them in!" Within a few moments the four smiling sisters had hastily genuflected and run to save their blue and white habits from being "rewashed".

I was left by myself in the little chapel, laughing out loud with Jesus at the rather comical interruption. "Don't worry," I could hear Jesus telling all of us, "I just wanted to mix things up a little...gotta keep you all on your toes! As long as you do what you're doing with me, our conversation isn't really interrupted. It's just an unexpected turn in the road."

You see, Jesus wants to have an intimate relationship with each one of us, but he also wants to keep the love story REAL. None of this "perfect-love-story-with-no-conflict-or-humor" for the King of the Universe. Nah, he's too down-to-earth for that. He much prefers an adventure-love story, with plenty of party-crashing, direction-changing, perfect-plan-frustrating moments.

Maybe we hear this and are not quite sure if we're up for that kind of story or relationship. That's ok! Take that very thing to prayer. That being said, have one thing clear: when Christ reaches out his hand and says "Follow me," you can expect a rather crazy adventure. But I promise you, from experience, that the adventure awaiting you is worth every minute. So don't be afraid to take Christ's hand and enter THE greatest adventure-love story ever!