

"Prayer is the vital act...Prayer is friendship with God." ~ George Buttrick

When I started this series of weekly reflections, the motivation was primarily to share with my faith community some of what I felt God was teaching me about prayer. For the past five years I have been researching contemplative prayer with a special interest in the practice of centering prayer, often described as a way of resting in God's presence. When I arrived home from the hospital after my surgery I started to pull books off the shelves that I had wanted to read for years but previously couldn't find the time to. I also gathered up the handful of books that had recently given me the most insight into the practice of prayer and went online to order a few more. Renie was then, and has remained, very tolerant of my piles of books left everywhere around the house. As usual, I have finished very few of the books but am very deep into at least ten of them at a time!

One thing has become very apparent: **reading and knowing more about prayer isn't as effective and satisfying as developing a consistent practice of prayer in its many forms. In the past weeks I have often felt a nudge, I'm sure from God's Spirit, to put the books down and simply spend some time with God, usually beginning with a psalm or Gospel passage and ending in quiet listening to the "heartbeat of the Father"** (Henri Nouwen's phrase). As in so many areas of our lives, we learn best by doing! Experience, rather than knowledge draws us closer to God.

My first reflection was built around an image of prayer from George Buttrick's Prayer, a book written in 1941 which I found on the shelves of a used bookstore. As I continue to read through this very insightful study, Buttrick continues to encourage me to put my faith in prayer into practice. (Maybe that's part of why I never seem to finish these books!) Here's the latest passage that caused me to close the book and spend time with my Abba:

"We have affirmed in these pages that prayer can turn the event, change the person, and give access of life in highest Friendship. If these claims are even half true ~ we believe they are fully true ~ prayer is the vital act. Bluntly, what do we most need? We need Someone to thank for life's glory and danger. We need forgiveness ~ the assurance that the folly of our sins is forgotten, their wretchedness canceled, and their cruelty turned to man's ultimate gain. We need zest, another April to the soul. We need freedom from the pursuit of fears and the prison of hate. We need reinforcement ~ not merely our human resource, which at best can only point the prow and set the sails, but the sea wind and the sea tide to speed our stranded ventures. We need, in short, nothing less than friendship with God. the Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God. (Romans 8:16) We need that clear testimony of the Spirit, the brooding and breathing of another World, the known presence of the Ideal Companion.

Jesus said we could gain it through prayer. A little thing, this stilling of the mind to reverence, this schooling of the will? A little thing to bring so vast a boon? The optic nerve is a little thing, but it gives us sun, stars, and all the wonders of the earth. Prayer is the optic nerve of the soul." (from Prayer by George Buttrick, pp 253,54 Abingdon-Cokesbury)

May your week be full of the practice of prayer! Under God's Mercy, Howie

Midweek Reflection # 13 ~ "Prayer is the vital act."