

I absolutely love the story of the little girl who is asked by her mother if she said her night-time prayers. "Yes, mother," she replies. "But when I got down on my knees, I began thinking that God hears the same old stuff every night. So I told him the story of The Three Bears instead."

It's a silly image but shows a deeply profound understanding of God and prayer. Our gospel reading talks about prayer and piety and the practice of your faith. I believe we often think of faith and God things as a special category of activity that is distinct and holy from our usual routine.

When I was a child I was taught to pray by folding my hands, closing my eyes, and bowing my head. And then the words I was supposed to say were solemn and sincere words. They were asking for things that I needed and that other people needed. They were also giving thanks for good things I received. And maybe it was okay to ask God some questions about things I didn't really understand. But I certainly didn't expect to hear

any answers - either from a loud voice speaking from the sky - or a still small voice from within my head.

I would hear teachings about prayer like the ones from Jesus in our gospel reading and I felt that prayer should be humble and sincere, and between God and myself. I certainly shouldn't try to impress other people with my eloquent words.

If you grew up in an active church-going household you were probably taught some similar things. But if you were, you were probably like me in that you were missing some things.

Karl Barth is considered one of the greatest theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He once wrote, "The first and basic act of theological work is prayer." (*Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, Pg. 160) That's a wonderful thought from a great theologian; but what is theology?

When I began seminary the professors would often give an assignment like, "What are your theological understands of..." Or, "Reflect theologically on..." Perhaps I shouldn't confess my

incredible ignorance of what I was doing, but I often found myself saying, "What do you mean? What is 'theology'?"

If you dissect it into its Greek root words you can define theology as a "word about God." That's fine, but what does it really mean. Just like prayer, theology sounds like a serious and somber undertaking. Perhaps it is something that should come with a warning label that says, "Closed course, professional driver. Do not attempt."

And yet as Jesus talks about it, the story of The Three Bears could well be theology too. Jesus often spoke in parables and exaggerations, and if we forget that when we read our gospel reading we find that Jesus is giving us an impossible task. He says, "When you give alms, do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing." Well, unless you have some serious problems in brain chemistry where the two halves of your brain don't communicate, this one's impossible.

Or what about those times when you are asked to pray in public. You know you are supposed to be sincere and not pray for the approval of others, yet you know that you are being

judged by everyone else who hears you. Maybe you aren't trying to pray with eloquent words in order to get praise, but you do know that if you stutter and bumble around too much people are going to look down on you. Is that fear wrong? Is that what Jesus meant when he said pray in private?

I believe Jesus wants your prayers to be ordinary ones. They should be simple, and they may not even take any formal form of prayer. Theology is the same way. Karl Barth, brilliant as he was, knew this about theology - in fact that's what made him so good. Theology is not a serious endeavor. It is every thought, every question, every answer - many of them quite ordinary. Barth describes it as trying to understand what God is doing now; and you wanting to know how you fit into it. Theology is those odd doubts that will wander through your mind where you find yourself thinking, "Is this all true? Does God really have a plan? God are you even real?"

The same goes for prayer. You're praying every time you're thinking. How do you solve a problem? How do you overcome an obstacle? How are you going to react? I believe that according to Jesus, these are authentic prayers.

You probably noticed there's a gap in our gospel reading. We read from Chapter 6 vs. 1-6 and then skip to 16-21. In between that, vs. 7-15, we find the Lord's Prayer, which we will be praying later. Though we speak that prayer like a formula often, realize just how daily and ordinary it really is.

And I think the same can be said for almsgiving. Do you see charitable giving as only a great act where you pull out your wallet or check book, think about the amount you are going to give, and then write the check or pull out the cash or make the electronic funds transfer? What if almsgiving as Jesus intends it is also very ordinary?

Imagine for a moment that you are holding a newborn baby. Have you ever considered how much almsgiving you are doing in that act? You are providing support - you're literally holding the baby up and protecting it from gravity. You're also giving it safety and comfort. Perhaps you're rocking it to sleep, or maybe you're making silly faces and noises to make the baby smile. You are giving your attention, you're physical strength, and those moments of your life to the baby. You can't ever get

it back. It's simply a gift. It is a genuine, but ordinary act of almsgiving. Your right hand doesn't know what your left hand is doing.

You are similarly giving to other people all the time. Perhaps it's just a pleasant attitude to a flustered clerk at a supermarket. Maybe it's just paying attention and listening to a friend who is sharing his or her struggles. It might be a million small gestures you make every day and don't even know it.

Human communication and relationships are enormously complex. We are passing subtle messages back and forth all the time. Even in a simple conversation you are communicating to another person with every word and gesture that you find him or her: annoying or likeable, boring or interesting, draining or nourishing, unimportant or important.

Every minute action of yours that communicates to someone else that he or she is a child of God with value and dignity you are giving alms. And you're probably doing more to build the

kingdom of God than anyone who gives a huge pile of cash to have a building named after him or her.

Prayer is ordinary. It is every thought and question, whether consciously directed to God or not. Almsgiving is ordinary. It can be every word and gesture. Your piety is ordinary. It is a witness into your faith.

In our gospel reading Jesus didn't set his disciples any great tasks. He wants them to see discipleship as a way of being - a way of living; perhaps all too ordinary for the egos of some, but nevertheless very effective.

Your Father who is in secret knows what's in your heart, and will build you up always. Amen