

Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C July 28, 2013

A story is told in the Eastern Orthodox tradition about a bishop who was making his pastoral visit to a small island inhabited by only three monks...simple men of prayer. The bishop asked them how they pray. They responded, "This is how we pray: we simply say 'We are three, You are three, have mercy on our souls.'" The bishop was a bit perplexed at the potential inaccuracy of their prayer, suggesting that God was "three" without being one. So he said, "From now on this is how you are to pray: Our father Who art in heaven..." Don't pray the other prayer anymore pray only the Our Father. The bishop left them.

Several weeks later, the bishop was at his residence that overlooked the sea. Suddenly he saw a small boat coming to the port, containing the three monks he taught to pray. But there was a beautiful "glow" surrounding the three monks, which captivated the bishop. They came to the shore and went up to the bishop's residence. He greeted them and asked them why they came to see him, all the while being mesmerized by this wonderful aura surrounding them. They said that they forgot the words to the Our Father and came to once again learn the prayer. The bishop thought for awhile and said, "This is how you are to pray: 'We are three, You are three, Lord have mercy on our souls.'"

Those monks were holy and the bishop very wise. Prayer is not about the correct words to say but about a relationship with a living God who revealed himself as "Father." The dialogue between Abraham and God revealed a God who *listens* to us, calling us by name. But we have to be persistent in this relationship, much like the man in the parable in the gospel who gave the friend the bread he needed because this surprised visitor was persistent. He *listened* to the friend's plea." In our prayer we keep searching and knocking and asking...and our God always *listens* and answers. The only difficulty is that we have to stop talking and *listens* to the ways our God speaks to us in the silence of our hearts.

And we want to know how to pray, just like the disciples in today's gospel. Prayer is an encounter with the God who dwells within our hearts and when we allow God to "breathe" within, a "spark" occurs that can only be described as being loved by Love itself. People of prayer have a certain "glow" about them, like the three monks, because love emanates from within. St. Teresa of Avila teaches that prayer is simply being with Jesus as a friend who wants us to rest in his presence.

You know you are praying not by the words you say but by how your life is transformed. Pope Francis gave me a beautiful image of prayer and its effects. He *listened* to the president of Brazil welcome him and speak a about the many challenges facing the people of Brazil, particularly, poverty and the growing diversity of religions. Catholicism is losing many people to evangelical religions. Pope Francis responded by saying that he has arms wide enough to embrace and love all the people, welcoming the complexities of the culture. Prayer pushes our horizons back further and further, bringing God into our encounters with people of many beliefs and cultures. The answer to every prayer is the Holy Spirit, a gift who ignites the fire of God's Love within, compelling us to *listen* to the other and rediscovering God in a way never before imagined.