

A man was driving around town in a sweat – because he could not find a parking place and he was late for an important meeting.

Looking up to heaven he prayed, “Lord, help me! If you find me a parking place I’ll go to Mass every Sunday for the rest of my life -----and I’ll give up drinking.”

All at once, he saw a parking place open up right in front of the building where he had his meeting. The man looked to heaven again and said, “Never mind, God; I just found a parking space.” The man hadn’t yet learned to recognize when his prayers had been answered. . .

A Catholic school teacher asked one of her young students, “now tell me honestly, Johnny, do you say prayers at home before eating your evening meal?”

“Why no,” Johnny said, “I don’t have to. My mom is a pretty good cook.”

Johnny hadn’t learned yet that prayer is more than just asking for things. . .

So then, what exactly is prayer – and what should we expect when we pray?

Last week, I got to spend time with 5 other priests on retreat – and that experience reminded me about a thing or two I’ve learned about prayer over the years.....

But first, let’s take this as a simple definition of prayer: a loving conversation with God. Prayer is a loving conversation with God – nothing more, nothing less. Kind of like Abraham in the first reading – he was simply letting God know about something that was on his mind – the well-being of any innocent people in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. . .

Now back to my retreat. First of all – 6 priests getting together for a week – doesn’t just happen – it has to be planned. And I think something that we should remember about prayer, our loving conversations with God – is they are more likely to happen if we plan them --- because if we say “I’ll talk to God when I have some time” – that usually doesn’t happen. . . because we all know how busy we are.

Not to say spontaneous prayer can’t happen – but if we want to grow closer to God, grow in holiness, then establishing set times for prayer is a must – so first thing in the morning, the last thing at night, in the middle of the day when we stop for lunch, 15 minutes before Mass begins, or 10 minutes after. . .

We all find time to do what is important to us – does that apply to our loving conversations with God? Many times if we don’t plan the time – things just fall through the cracks.

Next it is through those regular conversations that we establish trust with God – or feel comfortable in God’s presence. Some of the priests I was with have been my friends for over 20 years. The most recent addition to our group was 5 years ago. . . We get together once a month – so it is because we have spent that ongoing time together with each other – that we feel very comfortable in each other’s presence – and trust each other enough to talk freely about our challenges and our accomplishments – our hopes and our fears. That same trust with God comes only by consistently spending time in God’s presence – much like Mary did with Jesus in last Sunday’s Gospel.

Because we know each other well and spend consistent time with each other --- we’re okay when the conversations run their course and silence takes over – we don’t have the need to fill the time with noise or chatter: we can just enjoy each other’s company.

I think that’s a sign that we have really developed a trusting relationship with God – when the words can just give way to silence – and we just enjoy spending time in each other’s company. . . God knows our thoughts, our hopes, dreams and desires. Yes it’s good for us to voice those things to God --- but then we need to feel comfortable enough to allow God to speak to us – and that comes in those moments of silence.

You may or may not notice that I encourage those moments of silence – even in the prayer we celebrate together here – Sunday after Sunday. A little silence after the homily. A little silence after Communion – just so we can soak in the presence of God – as a friend of mine would say.

Also you may notice I intentionally try to slow us down – especially when our recitation of some prayers gets going like a fast train. . .

Prayer, especially public prayer, does not have to be rushed through – as if we can't wait to get on to something else – perhaps things we consider to be more important. . .

What can be more important than time spent in the presence of our loving maker --- who want us to call him Father?

What hopefully happens when we spend consistent time in loving conversations with our God – is that we are changed. We pray so that God's will can be done in our lives and in our world – not our wills.

We pray so that we can come to love the things God loves – like compassion, and mercy, and forgiveness --- to those we love, and even our enemies.

And that we have a care and concern for those God does --- those left on the side of the road by a secular society that could care less about giving them a hand out of the ditches that all of us, at times, find ourselves in.

You have heard me preach long enough to know that I always like looking for connections in the Gospel – how themes or values are carried from one week to the next. . .

2 weeks ago, we had that marvelously compassionate story of the Good Samaritan – followed last week by the Gospel of the very busy Martha and her contemplative sister, Mary.

We want to be, and in fact are called to be – not just Good Samaritans – but great ones: Busy about building the kingdom of God. . . But the only way we can sustain that type of activity --- is by consistently spending time in the presence of the one who nurtures and sustains us – Jesus Christ.

And next week, a reminder that a great distraction in spending time with the Lord and building the kingdom of God ----- is when we get too worried about the things of this world.

God bless your faith journey this week!