

“First Watch” Touch Points for Evangel’s Prayer Vigil team

For the week of May 24, 2015

Developing a Praying Life – part 21

INSIGHTS from A Praying Life by Paul E. Miller from Part 4: Living in Your Father’s Story / Chapter 22

HOW GOD PLACES HIMSELF IN THE STORY (Ch. 22)

When we are in the middle of the desert, we feel like God is absent. We long for God to show himself clearly, to make sense of the mess. Like Job, we say to God, “Why do you hide your face?” (13:24). To answer, let’s watch how Jesus positioned himself with three different women, all of whom were suffering in what seemed like a meaningless story. [We have room for two of them here.]

The Canaanite Woman and Her Needy Daughter....The gospel of Matthew [ch. 15] tells the story of a Gentile woman, a Canaanite, who is pestering Jesus and the disciples relentlessly because her daughter is possessed by a demon and needs help. Initially, Jesus is silent....He is deliberately ambiguous. He just listens.

The disciples feel the awkwardness of the situation and ask Jesus to resolve it [by sending her away]....Instead [he refers to] the ethnic barrier between them....Sensing an opening, the woman throws herself at his feet and pleads, “Lord, help me.”

Jesus’ response is maddening. He continues his ambiguity...[she persists]...Jesus marvels at her faith and gives her his Great Faith Oscar—“O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.”

If Jesus were a magic prayer machine, he’d have healed this woman’s daughter instantly, and we would not have discovered her feisty, creative spirit. Likewise, Jesus’ ambiguity with us creates the space not only for him to emerge but us as well. If the miracle comes too quickly, there is no room for discovery, for relationship. With both this woman and us, Jesus is engaged in a divine romance, wooing us to himself.

Another Woman and Her Needy Daughter....Over a twenty-five-year period, Jill [Miller’s wife] wrestled with God for [autistic daughter] Kim. Week after week during our family prayer time Jill would pray for strength and faith—strength to get from one end of the day to the other and faith not to throw in the towel....She wrote this journal entry

right after she discovered that she was pregnant with our sixth child, Emily. Kim was five years old.

...It really is faith that is at stake—the suffering is really a side issue. Just to tell Jesus what I need and leave it with him is such a struggle—especially as I see Kim struggle daily. It really breaks my heart.

Two days later....Jill wrote, “Give me the faith to leave this with you. Please help her to talk.” Then the journal goes silent. It would be ten years before Jill would have the faith and the energy to write another entry in her prayer journal. It would be twenty years before Kim would begin to speak, at age twenty-five. God left Jill in confusion in order to grow her faith, her ability to connect with him. To become like a child. Jill had to become weak again.

Jesus’ ambiguous interaction with both Jill and the Canaanite woman is a minicourse in prayer. God permitted a difficult situation in both of their lives, and then he lingered at the edge. Not in the center, at the edge. If he were in the center, if they had had regular visions of him, they would not have developed the faith to have a real relationship with him. God would have been a magic prayer machine, not a friend and lover.

When God seems silent and our prayers go unanswered, the overwhelming temptation is to leave the story—to walk out of the desert and attempt to create a normal life. But when we persist in a spiritual vacuum, when we hang in there during ambiguity, we get to know God. In fact, that is how intimacy grows in all close relationships.

....When we suffer, we long for God to speak clearly, to tell us the end of the story, and most of all, to show himself....Jill was profoundly changed in her twenty-five year wait. If God had instantly explained everything to her and healed Kim, that change would not have taken place. No one works like him. He is such a lover of souls.

Next week: “Praying Without a Story”

From *A Praying Life*, Paul E. Miller, NavPress (2009), pages 189-94 (chapter 22)

PRAYER PROMPTS

- Pray for those who find themselves in the desert of suffering and unanswered prayer, that they will allow God to work in his time. Praise God for those who have grown in faith and intimacy with him as the result of such an experience.
- Reflect on this week’s worship service, the music, Scriptures, and Pastor Dave’s message “Awaiting the Son—In Every Letter of Mine” (Thessalonians). Pray that the Lord will lead you to ways to apply the lessons learned in your own walk with Christ, as you connect with different people this week.
- Continue to pray for opportunities to invite people to our services, particularly Maundy Thursday and Easter Sunday, and to become engaged in spiritual discovery with the people of Evangel in other ways as well. Ask the Lord to open doors of conversation, connection or compassion with others to enable that engagement this week.

* A podcast of the sermon and other materials will be posted on the website by Monday.

Touch Points is e-mailed every Friday, posted on the website (www.evbapt.org), with printed copies available in the lobby. To be included in the weekly e-mail, use the Contact Us form on the website and request “add me to the Prayer Vigil list.”