

I wonder if you know the Russian story ‘The Three Hermits’ by Leo Tolstoy? It has been paraphrased many times. In case you don’t know the story, here’s an abridged version by the great Jesuit spiritual writer, Anthony de Mello:

When his ship stopped at a remote island for a day, the bishop determined to use the time as profitably as possible. He strolled along the seashore and came across three fishermen mending their nets. In pidgin English they explained to him that centuries before they had been Christianized by missionaries. “We, Christians!” they said, proudly pointing to themselves.

The bishop was impressed. Did they know the Lord’s Prayer? They had never heard of it. The bishop was shocked. How could these men claim to be Christian when they did not know something as elementary as the Lord’s Prayer?

“What do you say, then, when you pray?”

“We lift eyes in heaven. We pray, ‘We are three, you are three, have mercy on us.’”

The bishop was appalled at the primitive, the downright heretical, nature of the prayer. So he spent the whole day teaching them to say the Lord’s Prayer. The fishermen were poor learners, but they gave it all they had and before the bishop sailed away next day he had the satisfaction of hearing them go through the formula without a fault.

Months later the bishop's ship happened to pass by those islands and the bishop, as he paced the deck saying his evening prayers, recalled with pleasure the fact that on that distant island were three men who were now able to pray correctly, thanks to his patient efforts. While he was lost in thought he happened to look up and noticed a spot of light in the east. The light kept approaching the ship and, as the bishop gazed in wonder, he saw three figures walking on the water towards the boat. The captain stopped the boat and all the sailors leaned over the rails to see the amazing sight.

When they were within speaking distance, the bishop recognized his three friends, the fishermen. "Bishop," they exclaimed, "We so glad met you. We hear your boat go past and come hurry-hurry meet you."

"What is it you want?" asked the bishop in awe.

"Bishop," they said, "We so, so sorry. We forget lovely prayer. We say: Our Father in heaven, holy be your name, your kingdom come... then we forget. Please tell us whole prayer again."

The bishop felt humbled. "Go back to your homes, my good men, 'he said,' and each time you pray, say this, "We are three, you are three, have mercy on us!"

And Anthony de Mello comments: I have sometimes observed old women recite endless rosaries in church. How could God possibly be glorified by this incoherent mumble? But

each time I gaze into their eyes or look at their upturned faces I know in my heart that they are closer to God than many learned scholars.

(this version found here: <https://www.saintthomaschurch.org/sermons/out-of-the-mouth-of-very-babes-2017-06-11/>)

Faith can be quite humbling – especially for those of us who think we have it mastered. The hermits in the story – like the woman who touches the fringe of Jesus’ garment, and the leader who humbles himself asking Jesus to heal his daughter, and the tax collector Matthew who drops everything to follow Jesus – are willing to give up any sense of pride in order to know the healing power of God through Jesus.

Yes, the woman is desperate to have her bleeding stop. But her longing is just as deep to find her way back into community. By her affliction, she was deemed unclean and was pushed to the margins. Her faith in Jesus brought her back into wholeness in both accounts.

Sure, the leader was desperate to have his daughter healed, but at what cost? The temple leadership scorned Jesus and anyone who associated with him. It wouldn’t be farfetched for the leader to imagine himself scandalized by his peers for kneeling before Jesus ... the professional mourners *laughed at his faith in Jesus* Maybe they could see going to those lengths for a son, but for a daughter?!? Jesus bore witness to the value of *every life* by bringing the girl back from death’s door.

Matthew, a Jew employed by the Romans to bilk his peers with exorbitant and unfair taxes, assents to follow the call of Jesus in order to find his way ... home. Wealth and

security were not the answers; returning to *Adonai* was. To quote the poem we read in morning prayer on Friday,

Whatever (caused me to go astray) is irrelevant now. My heartbeat is the compass. The guiding beacon to lead me back to me/we/us. On my way home I can cry. Tears can stain the path. The truth is, I always know how to get back home. Even when the world's a mess. I just have to put my hand over my heart and find the rhythm. (<https://enfleshed.com/blogs/poetics/prayers-for-finding-the-way-home-again/>)

Following Jesus was Matthew's way of finding the rhythm of the heart. It is also ours!

The prophet Hosea says it succinctly, "For (God) desire(s) steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Jesus reiterates that in his message to the Pharisees who judged Jesus for eating with "tax collectors and sinners" – he said to them, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" By "sacrifice" Jesus means public offerings made to God to show how righteous a person is. True righteousness comes in how you treat the one who suffers, the one who is struggling, the one who is on the outside looking in.

We can learn to recite all the prayers we want, but until they are said from the heart, and are the impetus for focusing the ways we live our lives – with mercy – those prayers are empty.

A couple of weeks ago, Celinda and I went to hear a lecture by Bryan Stevenson. Stevenson is best known for his memoir *Just Mercy* which recounts his founding of the Equal Justice Initiative (eji.org) and his life's work defending marginalized, poor,

and wrongfully convicted Americans on death row. His passion and dedication to advocating justice for his clients is powerful. One of the things he said in his lecture that impacted me was, “Be proximate to those who are struggling/suffering. To do so instigates the desire to advocate for justice.” *(repeat)*

He relayed the story of his first client, Walter McMillan, in 1988, on death row in Alabama. A newly minted lawyer, Stevenson was intimidated; was pretty sure he wasn't equipped for the moment. Instead of being downtrodden, once McMillian heard from Stevenson that he would not be put to death that year, his spirit rebounded. As he left their meeting room, the guards had bound his hands and feet and were shoving him out, McMillian stopped, closed his eyes and sang the gospel hymn "Higher Ground." Stevenson recounted that even the guards paused their abusive behavior in that moment of grace. It forever impacted Stevenson's life, and stoked his desire to serve others in McMillan's situation.

Stevenson testified that even in your ignorance, things open up in your heart when you are regularly proximate to those who are suffering.

This is not just the witness of a lawyer promoting justice, this is the profound truth of Jesus, and what Jesus demonstrated within his own context – calling out, “Follow me.”

When we step into mercy, we also find meaning, purpose, identity, and, ultimately peace – for we bear witness to the presence of God.

We are three, you are three, have mercy on us. Amen.