Improving Conscious Contact: The Prayer Jesus Needed

I’m thinking God, for his own reasons that go beyond us, is opening up to us an **ancient path** to a place called prayer. A place **inhabited** by the Father, and his Son, and the love between them also known as the Holy Spirit. A place **surrounded** by a cloud of witnesses, because it is a place we go, in some sense, together with all the saints. And it is a place where we **discover & become** ourselves.

This is a place Jesus in the gospels frequented often—a hidden from view place he visited mainly in the mornings because that’s what worked for him. Granted, as a place it’s something we’ve largely lost sight of—it being just beyond our worldview. But help is on the way because the dear Lord Jesus is in the process of opening the eyes of our hearts.

In times of old, this place was considered the stomping ground of **monks & mystics**. But that’s a **myth** that will soon be undermined. Because this is a place for **sinners** in need of God, that is to say, **humans**, a.k.a., **us**. In fact, I think we’re going to see the **unlikeliest** people, people very much like us, taking this place by storm, barging right in, forgetting to take off their muddy boots.

Of course, because we’re so very human, too much/too soon, would scare whatever daylight’s in us right out of us. We’re going to find our way—are already finding our way, being led by **various means lovingly suited** to our mean estate, so to speak. So we will **stumble**—are stumbling—along on this ancient path. Most of us will enter this place in our usual **fog**. We’ll peek inside first and wonder where we are. We’ll enter like we do most things, in fits & starts.

**BUT WE ARE GOING TO FIND OUR WAY**—OR, RATHER, A WAY WILL BE FOUND FOR US. This is promise, as long as we’re willing to sprinkle in what faith we have and lots of patience, mainly with ourselves.

**Shall we start with Jesus?** The gospels have much to say about the prayer life of Jesus. We can only imagine that prayer was the place where Jesus, in his humanness, became Jesus, in whatever way that humans have to become what they already are.
“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” Mark 1: 9-11. Luke’s account adds a clarifying detail, “And as he [Jesus] was praying, heaven was opened…” (Lk. 3:22)

We all know how important first impressions are and this is our first impression of Jesus praying. He is praying in the unearned, undeserved (in his case) status of sinner. And he is experiencing God as his Abba who is pleased with him. (This is why Mark begins his story with “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God” Mark 1:1 Whatever else this title, “Son of God” may signify, it means that Jesus was the beloved child of God.

We’ve just been told the point, purpose and the payoff of following Jesus into this place of prayer. This is the place where we, who have earned and deserved (by much hard work and effort!) the sinner status, get to taste the unearned, undeserved love of God as our dear Abba Father. And, once we unwind enough, to feel his pleasure.

(I’m reminded of my friend Elise, whose husband she told me, had never known the reality of being loved unconditionally by another human being growing up. When Elise’s husband finally came with her to church on Sunday, he sat in the pew and cried. Not his modus operandi, either. He turned to Elise and said in wonder, “I feel like something inside me is beginning to unwind.” Whatever it was inside of him is inside of each one of us—and once this something begins to unwind we begin to experience the love of God.)

The point, the purpose and the payoff of going with Jesus to this place of prayer is to be pickled in love. Because this love is the only thing that will preserve us. Without it we become that cucumber you find in your refrigerator long past its genetically engineered and extended due date. And if you’re like me, pretend not to notice so your wife can do the honors of removing it.

I’m not saying this is the initial experience of prayer, just as the cucumber doesn’t get pickled as soon as it’s dipped in the brine.
But it is the point, the purpose and the payoff of Jesus prayer.

Mark in his gospel is making three points about Jesus’ prayer: 1) that Jesus got himself soaked in love in this place 2) the more mundane point that he needed to go there a lot 3) the effect his prayer had on him. And he makes all three points in first chapter, as we’ll see. But the most important point is this first one: that prayer was the place where Jesus got himself saturated in Abba love.

This first impression is reinforced so that it’s lasting: Like when he went up on the mount of transfiguration. [Lk. 9:28-35] This is a place of prayer in it’s intensely wonderful form, with all the markings: 1) it is a place of solitude; 2) Jesus invites his disciples to come with him to this place; 3) it is obviously a communion of saints (Elijah & Moses appear with him there)…and 4) his disciples fall asleep [either because they are bored or it’s too much—the challenge for us mortals!]

But what happened up there? “A cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” (Mk. 9: 7)

In the garden of Gethsemane, when he’s in deep grief, who’s he pouring his heart out to? “Abba, Father!” (Prayer is an unloading zone for our distress.) And when the grief was released, angels attended him. He was comforted in Abba’s love.

So that’s first & foremost about Jesus’ prayer: that it was a place for him to be soaked, surrounded, saturated in Abba’s love.

The second & nextmost point: his soul needed this often. “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” Mk. 1: 35

Jesus is often shown eating in the gospels. Why is he eating? Because he’s human and he needs food. Why would we infer any other reason for his praying? Than that he needed to pray?

We need to decide: did Jesus pray because he was a super-spiritual being, or because he was human & needed conscious contact?
If we view his prayer as a sign of super-spirituality, we’ve effectively locked him safely away in stained glass where he won’t bother us. But if we view his prayer as something he needed, look out! Because if he needed it, maybe we do too.

Jesus seems to have had two preferences in his prayer life: first, early morning. Because that’s what worked for him. In fact, Jesus seems to have been the ultimate morning person. (Remember, early one Sunday morning when he was up and at ‘em?) Now, you may not be a morning person, but morning is not the point so much as that Jesus needed to go to this place called prayer often, daily, we infer.

(I’m discovering people who maintain an ongoing conversation with God throughout the day. And I think they are getting themselves gently soaked in love along the way. I don’t know how many of them have morning prayers. But they are finding themselves in prayer throughout the day.)

But along with his morning preference Jesus preferred his solitude. And I’m guessing with solitude came silence.

Many a mother hounded by kids, has been soaked in love in the solitude of the bathroom. Many a salesperson has been soaked in love in the solitude of car.

[One of the early steps of coming into this place, is carving out a little solitude and learning to savor a little silence.]

Throughout gospel, Jesus is inviting his disciples to come with him away from the frenzied crowded place into a place of solitude. “That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, ‘Let us go over to the other side.’” (Mk. 4:35)

So Jesus got himself soaked in love in the prayer place. And he needed to go there a lot.

And the effect of his being there was the tenderest love--compassion--for others.
After that early morning prayer in Mk. 1, a leper finds Jesus, and “Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.” [Mk. 1:40-42]

Compassion, in the Greek, “splanchnizomai” [same root as our “spleen”]: moved in the gut. The love of God moves from the mind into the heart and eventually settles in the gut as compassion.

Isn’t it interesting how this is reflected our songs? The love of God always seems to be falling downward in our music. Anger rises up, but love descends. In the place of prayer, Jesus meditated on Torah, Hebrew prophets and Psalms, and the love of God he found there, moved from his mind, into his heart, until eventually he felt it in his gut. Where laughter comes from (belly laugh) and deepest gut wrenching grief seems to be located.

The spiritual masters of old speak of moving from the mind into the heart. Jonathan Edwards, the great theologian of the Great Awakening, spoke of this as his daily experience. Light in his mind leading to warmth in his heart.

This is the experience of Abba love Jesus needed to love the world. And I’m thinking it’s the experience of Abba love that we need to love the world, and each other, and ourselves.

And oh, the tenderness of this love! I got a taste it last week at our Single Moms Night Out. We had a record turnout: 60 moms, 80+ of their kids and about 50 men and women from the church to serve them all. I had the honor of attending the meal before helping with the kids. And this is the scene:

The tables are set out for a feast. The menu: butternut squash soup, salad; pork tenderloin with an apple chutney (or something fancy like that) and rice pilaf. And dessert with some name. A crew of young men and women are hovering nearby—the waitstaff with white shirt and tie, and white aprons; the chefs, three men in their chef hats busy in the kitchen—the café filled with the aroma of the impending meal.

Nancy stands up to gather everyone’s attention: “Ladies, you children are as far away from you as they can while remaining in the building.
A team of responsible adults is feeding and caring for them. They will be fine. This time is for you. We are here to serve you. So take a deep breath and relax.” Nancy proceeds to pray grace, and while she’s praying, I’m getting all choked up. And when she’s done, I see I’m not the only one. One of the Single Moms and my table is in tears; she waves her hand next to her face and says, “Don’t mind me; it’s just that whenever I come here I feel so much love!” And it takes her about five minutes to collect herself from that brush with loving coming to town. That, my friends is the tender love of Jesus she was feeling. And it is the product of his having spent so much time getting saturated himself in the love of the Father in this place of prayer he went to so often.

So we’ve got three main guideposts already on this ancient path:

1. **The point, the purpose, the payoff of going to the place of prayer is to be soaked in love by Abba.** I know other things happen in/to/around us when we try to pray. We worry. Fret. Flail about in frustration. Feel guilty we’re not getting more out of it, blah, blah, blah… But that’s our brokenness. **The problem most of us have with prayer isn’t prayer, but the us that’s there.** He’s not bringing us to prayer to make us wallow in all that, but to love that miserable us, by unveiling to us, Abba love.

2. **Our soul, whether we know it or not, or come to grips with it our not, needs to find this place.** If he needed this, we do too.

Why it shows up in the 12 Steps. Step 11: “**sought through prayer & meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we under-stood Him.**” If the soul is not feeding off this place of prayer & meditation, God only knows what pig slop we’re trying to use for soul food.

Have you noticed that many addictions adopt a form that is a kind of demonic inversion of prayer? Many addictions involve false intimacies. Like prayer, they involve sneaking off somewhere, so to speak. We go to our addiction places alone, often, as we go to prayer. We go to these place to handle our pain, or find some pleasure, or to get any indication that we have a heartbeat.
The form our addictions take is a hint from heaven—that we are hungry for some soul food, but we settle instead for pig slop. And here's the rub: when you wake up to the fact that you’re feeding on pig slop—something beneath your human dignity [porn, etc.] the dark power wants you to wallow, not get your butt home for some soul food.

But our feeding on pig slop is a symptom of our desperate hunger. Like a thirsty man at sea will drink sea-water knowing it’ll kill him. When feeding on pig slop, don’t follow your shame which will only keep you wallowing, follow your hunger to some better soul food!

Which is why “prayer and meditation” is one of the essential steps in recovering our sanity in the insanity of addiction.

3. We will know we are finding our way to this place--having our beginning brushes with this reality--by this tender hearted love (compassion) happening in us for the world, for each other, and even (miracle of miracles!) for ourselves.

[One of the great consolations I have experienced of late in prayer: a sense of his kindness for me breaking in toward me. “My own soul let me more have pity on; let me be to my sad self hereafter kind” GMH

Take Away:

1. If you want help carving out a little space and time for prayer…have I mentioned The Divine Hours: A Manual for Prayer?

So I have! Because it’s been a wonderful experience for me these past few years. And the key to accessing prayer as a place. And here is, I think, one of the reasons:

Important things in life get secured by recurrence and a certain familiarity. For example, I was raised in the era when Dads were not encouraged to play around with their kids. But I have a wonderful memory of playing catch with my father. Because that is something we did on many occasions—tossing a ball back and forth in the front
yard. I don’t have a specific memory of each time that happened, but something like composite memory. And it’s been such a pleasant memory that I’ve tried to provide a few of these memories for my own kids. By doing certain enjoyable things, over and over with them. Familiar things in familiar surroundings. Because memory needs help. Our memories are better preserved when we have solid hooks on which to place them.

By praying most every morning now for three years using the Divine Hours, a familiar, recurring form, I have allowed for the creation in my soul of a memory place for prayer. And all of the little consolations that I have experienced in my morning prayers are tossed on that one hook like so many hats. And so I have a wonderfully pleasant composite memory of prayer that feeds me—and that beckons me whenever I am hungry for God, which is often. Just like I have wonderful memories of eating food at meal times, and so I look forward to my meals.

As I’m speaking this morning, I’m looking forward to being home in my warm bed having my night prayers. And as I lay me down to sleep, I look forward to waking up for my morning prayers, just like I’m looking forward to my morning coffee.

So when you have a recurring and familiar experience of prayer, such as is mediated by The Divine Hours, each time you come, there’s a sense you’ve been here before. The memories of being there have a place to hang their hat. (Of course this is not how it begins. It begins feeling a little foreign, but in time, that stranger becomes a fast friend.)

2. **Once you’ve got time-place carved out, through The Divine Hours or some other means that suits you better, be alert to moments for solitude & silence in your day when he may be saying, “Let’s get off by ourselves, for a little peace & quiet.”**

Start with one full minute of stillness/silence….build it up from there.

Now, if you’re like me, your mind may be a pre-school boy with the worst case of hyperactivity and attention deficit disorder. Especially when you try to take a moment’s silence. Especially if you’d like a
little interior quiet. That’s when your mind, like a hyper-active pre-
schooler, get’s up from watching Sponge Bob, and starts tugging on
your pants, like kids will do as soon as you get on the phone. (As long
as you’re not on the phone, they are happy to do other things, but
once the phone rings, they know it’s time to start yapping at you.)
Some of you have tried a little silence and said, “I prefer the noise of
the radio to the noise in my own head, thank you!” So you need a
little help with that bratty mind of yours.

Try this: during that minute of silence, or two, or ten, as your capacity
increases, pray a short prayer meditatively, as though you were
memorizing a short text of scripture, only without the pressure to get
something memorized. A prayer like, “Abba, I belong to you.” Or
“Jesus, I am here with you.” Or an old prayer in the Orthodox
tradition, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a
sinner.” (Which is a combination of the opening of Marks gospel and
a line from a parable in Luke’s gospel.)

As I say, pray this meditatively over and over, and you will find that
your chattering mind will wear out eventually and give you some
peace. And the words you’ve been praying will slip down from your
head into your heart—just as a memorized text off scripture is tucked
away in your heart. All to wonderful effect, with time.

But don’t be greedy. Don’t bite off more silence than you can chew.
Start with a minute—a full 60 seconds, and build it up from there as
you gain capacity. Which you will. Try this, in time, along with your
morning and night prayers, or if you are one of those people who
converses with God throughout the day almost non-stop, look for an
opportunity to slip away with the Lord Jesus for a time of solitude and
silence.

That’s all for starters. More to come on this ancient path to a place
called prayer….