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Prayer Letter, Fellowship of Saint Augustine

by The Rev. Jonathan Linman

Happily I accept this invitation to write a letter on the life of prayer for participants in the Fellowship of Saint Augustine. I write in the spirit of Luther's lovely treatise, "A Simple Way to Pray, for Master Peter the Barber," itself a compelling and thus commendable guide to prayer – check it out! Like Luther in that treatise, I here give you a practical accounting of how I tend to pray, in my case as one called to lead and serve the complex life of a Synodical Bishop's staff member. But first, some reflection on what we are up against these days.

We live in wrenching, dizzying, crazy times. It's as if the world, and sometimes church, have come unhinged. When I read accounts of what is happening at home and abroad, my mind frequently turns to the words of Martin Luther in one of the stanzas of "A Mighty Fortress" – "Though hordes of devils fill the land all threatening to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us. This world's prince may rage, in fierce war engage. He is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail! One little word subdues him. "God help us, but thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ, who is that "one little Word" who subdues and conquers!

Indeed, the powers and principalities, to invoke Pauline language, are at work in us and in our times, battling with the forces of light and love in Christ. Therefore, take heed to Paul's exhortation: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but

against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm." (Ephesians 6:10-13)

What is the whole armor of God for this Lutheran that enables standing firm and steadfast? In brief, that armor is prayerful engagement with the means of grace, through which Christ is made known to us, and through which this Word subdues the raging powers unleashed in our day. That is to say, the power to contend does not well up from my own resources, broken and sin-burdened man that I am. Rather it comes from without (*extra nos*) – namely, to call to mind Luther's list in the *Smalcald Articles*, the external means of proclamation of the Word, baptism and its thankful remembrance, the Eucharist, confession and absolution, and mutual conversation and consolation among brothers and sisters in Christian community. I seek to prayerfully engage these extraordinary, ordinary things in the course of my busy days.

For instance, I pray close to, and informed by the Word known in scripture. Paul in his correspondence, for example, keeps me grounded: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." (Romans 8:26) That's the bedrock foundation for me. God in the Spirit is already at prayer for me, regardless of my prayer discipline or, more likely, lack of discipline. The

Holy Spirit given to us in baptism ignites this prayer which that same Spirit prays without ceasing, 24/7. Any practice of prayer, then, simply brings into some focal awareness this foundational reality of God already at prayer for me, in me, and within and among all of my brothers and sisters in Christ.

So it is that I am beckoned to slow down and breathe, grace upon grace, taking it all in, that breath being God's very prayer, and the gift of life, for which I give hearty thanks. Sometimes I sit still and bask in such gracious abundance, welling up with appreciation, dwelling with God who already deigns to tabernacle with us. But alas, more often in a next breath, I am on the run again. I recall Brother Richard of Saint Augustine's House once saying, "You pray as you live your life. If you live your life on the run, you will pray on the run." Well, in New York City, I move quickly along with the hordes. But even in motion, I insist on praying close to the Word, offering Matins, often from memory, on the way to our Synod office – on the subway, bus, and walking. Likewise, I pray Vespers on the way back to my apartment. If I am occupied with a night meeting, then it's Compline that guides my way home. Throughout these engagements with the daily offices on the run, the Word makes its claim on me – the *Benedictus* of Zechariah, the *Magnificat* of Mary, the *Nunc Dimittis* of Simeon – assuring me of the gospel's promise and victorious fulfillment in Christ Jesus.

A centerpiece of our prayerful life together in the Metropolitan New York Synod among Bishop and his staff members is our daily prayer in our Synod office chapel. The Tibetan prayer bowl rings and sings at noon, the Holy Spirit calling us to be church, God's people gathered around Word and Sacrament. We, too, are church, not just bureaucrats and institutional, ecclesial functionaries! Daily we pray, hearing and reflecting on God's Word, remembering and giving thanks for baptism, celebrating Holy Communion on Wednesdays and other mid-week festivals, confessing and forgiving, engaging in mutual conversation and consolation. Sometimes the daily lectionary gives us the Word. More often, it is Philip Pfatteicher's *New Book of Festivals and Commemorations: A Proposed Common Calendar of Saints* (Fortress

Press, 2008). This ecumenical volume, inclusive of principally Lutheran, Anglican, and Roman Catholic calendars, gives us a rich menu of hagiographies of saints to remember and to be inspired by, along with appointed biblical readings, passages from the writings of these saints, and hymn suggestions. I commend it to you, for in this resource we are palpably reminded that we are indeed surrounded by a great cloud of witness in the communion of saints who cheer us on as we run the race, and as we contend with the powers and principalities. Together with these saints, we forever look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who in the gospel offers joy even amidst our cruciform ministries (cf. Hebrews 12:1-2). These occasions of daily prayer are a great oasis for us in our demanding lives of ministry.

There is much more I could say and commend, but space limitations prohibit additional musings. In brief, though, you now know how I engage the life of prayer on the run, during the busy, crazy weekdays. In essence, it's a taste of the monastic way centered on the daily offices amidst a lifestyle that is anything but monastic! Dear readers, you too can find your practical way with the means of grace in your own complex lives, in manners appropriate to your circumstances and callings. But above all, remember – *sola gratia*, grace alone – the Holy Spirit is already at prayer for and in you with sighs too deep for words. Everything else we might do in practicing disciplines of prayer is thus icing on the cake!

Prayerfully in Christ,

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