

The Road Less Traveled – March 17, 2017

I was going through my mail the other day and ran across a promotion for a new book and church curriculum on prayer. “Transform the prayer life of your congregation!” the flyer challenged, promising that, through this study, prayer would become as natural as breathing. It was ironic because just the day before we began our Lenten journey together, a journey that is characterized by a call to more deliberate and focused prayer. I have heard from several people in our church family that this particular area of discipleship poses a special challenge.

I assured them that they were not alone.

The truth is that prayer is an incredible gift that God gives us. It is the ability and opportunity to communicate directly with our Creator, and to have our Creator communicate with us. And yet it is one of the more difficult aspects of our faith. Many faithful people struggle with their prayer lives, not, I believe, because they don’t want to pray, but because they don’t know how to pray or they simply never feel comfortable doing it. Oh, there are formulas for prayer, but when it comes right down to it, prayer is about opening our hearts to God, and for most of us, it can be difficult. It is something that is central to our very being, and yet it can feel quite unnatural.

It reminds me of a time I spent watching my daughter practice gymnastics. She was maybe 7 years old or so, and she and her classmates were practicing on the balance beam. One by one they tried to gracefully walk down the balance beam and execute a simple dismount. Several of them managed the walk. One actually managed the dismount without falling. But none of them could have passed for graceful. Their movements were awkward, their steps tentative and every action was a deliberate battle between mind and body.

In fact, watching them, it was hard to reconcile what happened in that gym with what I watch on television during the Olympics. It’s not just that the Olympic gymnasts are technically and athletically superior. Clearly they are. But it is something more. There is a grace, a comfort and fluidity in their movement. Regardless of the difficulty of the move, they make it look as natural as walking is to me.

It’s not natural, of course, or at least it wasn’t always. The hard thing to remember is that there was a day when the young woman with the gold medal around her neck awkwardly walked across the balance beam for the first time – and many times after that. She, too, was tentative and halting, anything but graceful. No doubt she fell many times. But over time – because she forced herself to get back on the beam even when it felt wholly awkward – it began to feel more natural. Until the day when the beam under her feet felt as wide and safe as a sidewalk. And with that comfort came the ability to open her mind and body to a new and wonderful relationship, one of utter grace and beauty that boggles the minds of those who watch.

I don’t know about you, but to me, that’s the formula for prayer. It’s not about how you pray, it’s about *that* you pray. Few of us are born comfortably praying. It is awkward and it does feel unnatural and uncomfortably intimate. For many of us prayer is tentative and halting and anything but graceful. And we will fall off the prayer path. But God calls us to get back on the path and continue to press on. And slowly – sometimes all too slowly – it begins to feel more natural, until the day when talking to God feels as comfortable as talking to a friend.

And that, as God might say, is good.

See you Sunday.