Listening Spirituality Forum (2-8-09 & 4-5-09)

Chapter 3: Talking to God: Human Activity in Prayer (from Vol. I of Listening Spirituality by Patricia Loring)

A. Prayer

"The best way to pray is as the Spirit is prompting or leading you at the time of prayer...
Prayer is as personalized and individualized as any conversation between two unique individuals – and varies as much from occasion to occasion as the conversation of two close friends" (p. 47). No "personal relationship can flourish when one partner is doing either all the talking or all the listening" (p. 48).

B. Intentionality

Patricia Loring views "intentionality" as "the ground of our intentions or purposes. Intentionality includes a kind of directionality of our being that shapes and guides our particular purposes" (p. 48). It inevitably comes into our prayers since it "is the organizing principle, whether we speak or listen" (p. 50)

1. Intentionality and the divided self

Borrowing from Paul Tillich's idea of "ultimate concern", Loring suggests that a major part of our spiritual development is in coming to place our ultimate concerns in God, in the ground of our being, trusting that the lesser concerns will be repatterned appropriately – and probably more fully than if one, another or a series of lesser concerns take the place of ultimate concern" (p. 50).

2. Prayer, intentionality and the process of transformation

In this section, a number of Christian paradoxes are referred to:

a) We "pray before we are able to pray in fullness. We pray in order to be brought to fullness" (p. 50).
b) Although prayer "is a gift from Spirit", "our intentional practice is vital" (p. 50).
c) Transformation requires both willfulness – being committed to a life centered on God – and willingness – allowing "our divided hearts" to be repatterned and "given over to God" (p. 51).

C. Seasons in Prayer: Presence and Absence

Prayer is easy and natural when we are experiencing its rewards or "consolations" such as "profound happiness, comfort, radiance, joy and strength" (p. 51). These gifts and blessings alternate with times of trial during which there is "dryness, lack of satisfaction in prayer, failure – or absence – of the sense of presence" (p. 52). People respond in a variety of ways when their prayers do not result in "consolatory warmth and sweetness" (p. 52).
According to Loring, it is almost always useful to look for ways in which we have withheld some part of ourselves or life from our relationship with God. This is true even though much of the time it will be difficult to discern a reason or cause for the aridity. We must accept that "it is a mystery" (p. 52) by reminding ourselves of "the limitations of our infant-knowledge of who God is and what God is doing in our lives, as well as affirming the presence even in seeming absence" (p. 53). The challenge is to "begin to live more trustingly in the confidence that there will be a return "of spiritual refreshment (p. 54).
After reviewing how Catholic mystics and Quakers have viewed "dark nights of the soul", Loring emphasizes that each experience of absence is unique. She encourages us to relate to these faith-building opportunities by living them, staying with them, and going "though them with all the integrity and faithfulness you are capable of" (pp. 55-56).

D. Discerning How You Are Led to Pray

Loring encourages her readers to view the options for prayer which she describes in the following way: "purposeful noticing of, and faithfulness to, the way the Spirit is guiding you at the present, is more important than deciding on principle what you want to do or what is supposed to be the right way to pray. Be more alert to interior promptings than to any outward reasoning" (p. 56).

E. Some Kinds of Active Prayer

Here is Loring's definition of active prayer: It is "prayer which begins in human activity – in which the impulse begins with humans; in which the manner of prayer is consciously chosen by them; in which people address themselves to God; in which we talk rather than listen" (p. 58). It takes practice to discern what sort of prayer is being encouraged by Spirit. Quaker tradition teaches us that with "experience, we come to know something about the earmarks of trustworthy intuitions. By and large, a habit of noticing the climate of the heart is more helpful than working through the matter analytically. For the moment, however, do what works best for you. Always feel free to correct your course as you learn more about where your inner sense was coming from – or not coming from" (p. 58).

1. Preformulated prayers

Although Quakers have emphasized silent worship and waiting for openings and leadings, it is a beautiful irony "that such waiting often reveals the deepest meanings of the liturgical prayers or the formulated prayers of mystics and other people of profound spiritual experience" (p. 59). Loring reminds her readers that the Lord's Prayer can be an inexhaustible source of inspiration and that it is hard to surpass the prayerful formulations of great spiritual masters such as St. Francis of Assisi (e.g., his prayer beginning "Lord make me an instrument of your peace…").

2. Praying with scripture

Devotional reading can open us and move us to pray spontaneously, either verbally or nonverbally.

3. Spontaneous prayer from our own lives and longing

a) On pages 61-62, Loring describes prayer beginning with the *examen*, prayer beginning with a Quaker journal, and prayer evoked by other sources.

b) *Prayers of Petition*: The author spends several pages (62-65) on prayers of petition: asking for what you want, hope, and long for. Although there are various reasons why people may resist prayers of petition, it is noteworthy that the "the word of the Bible – of contemplatives and mystics –" teaches that God is both transcendent and immanent, impersonal and personal. There is much spiritual experience which assures us "that – far from being excluded or excused from communication – our communication and participation is precisely what is wanted of us in the divine economy, process or plan of the universe" (p. 62).

Loring recommends that we follow the "example of Jesus' Gethsemani prayer (which) teaches that it is perfectly acceptable to ask for what one wants, within the clear understanding and context of 'Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done,' and faithful acceptance of the outcome. In fact, growing to pray that Gethsemani prayer in truth and fullness seems to be a large part of what spiritual transformation is about" (p. 63).

Finally, the author discusses the "question of answered and unanswered prayer (which is fraught with a great deal of confusion and pain" (p. 63). When one does not receive what has been asked for, it is common to question the worth of the petitioner, the worth of those who are being prayed for, and/or "the worthiness of the one to whom we pray" (p. 65). Although there is value in asking a variety of "why?" questions, we must

ultimately turn to contemplative praying in which we abandon our "ideas of how and why it all works: God, justice or prayer. It is to abandon ourselves to trust in the living presence and reality of the divine, mysteriously at work within the darkness of the human condition – a living presence apparently not in the business of straightening out everything as we would do, or to our specifications. To pray contemplatively is to give ourselves over to trust that it is sufficient for us to labor to be open and responsive to the level at which this divinity is present and working within and through us and all things. It is to accept a place in a living process whose end or shape is beyond our comprehension. It is to find in that our peace, joy and fulfillment" (p. 65).

c) *The Contemplative and Mystical Dimensions of Intercession*: In her answer to the question, "Why should we pray for others?", Loring quotes Edward Dunstan: "All intercession is self-offering, a self-giving, a longing that what we ask for others may be done, if need be, through ourselves" (quoted on p. 66).
Rather than "simply dumping" that which "is patently in need of healing, cleansing or reconciling" into the lap of the Divine Healer, we must also join our wills to God's and be open and willing to embrace the possibility that "our participation may be radically different than we imagine" (pp. 66-67). Loring emphasizes that it is important for us to come "to know our own brokenness and darkness" (p. 67). Intercessory prayer means to mediate or go between. It involves joining "the living, working Light,…(which) is the eternal working out of God's will in the universe" (p. 67).

4. Taking it seriously

a) *Costs* – These include: 1) "To truly hold someone or something in the Light requires acknowledging the limitations inherent in our humanity" (p. 68): 2) "It may be necessary for us to give up our own will and desires for the situation…and actively give ourselves over to whatever divine will requires" (pp.68-69); 3) Holding something or someone (especially those people who are "most difficult, outrageous, or evil") in the Spirit and Truth of the Light may not be possible "unless or until we are open to the cleansing of ourselves and our desires" (p. 69); and 4) We may be led to experiencing our own personal suffering and/or the pain of others as well as the world.

5. Temptations and Risks

One temptation for the "intercessory pray-er" is to "outrun our Guide. We do what we can, not what we can't. Especially we do what we are led to do and not what we imagine for ourselves as the logical extension of our vision" (p. 70).

According to Loring, most of the risks facing the intercessory pray-er "have their source in a fundamental temptation to inflation of ego" (p. 70). Among the risks facing those who label themselves as an intercessor or healer are the following: 1) "a sense of being a cause of whatever good may come, a sense of being the source of healing" (p. 70), when in truth, God is the "source of all healing power and of prayer itself" (p. 71); 2) "being drawn into glib, un-costly promises to pray for others" (p. 70); 3) "a sense of power or control over events" (p. 70); 4) "taking on the persona of a 'good person'" (p. 70); and 5) "working for the good opinion of others – rather than simply seeking to unite her(his) will with the will of God, for its own sake" (p. 70).