

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT | DECEMBER 4, 2022

ISAIAH 11:1-10 | PSALM 72:1-7, 18-19 | ROMANS 15:4-13 | MATTHEW 3:1-12

In this season of Advent, we're spending some time talking about prayer using James Martin's book *Learning to Pray*. If you weren't here last week, we began with Martin's definition of prayer: a "conscious conversation with God." And then we talked about how prayer transforms us by letting us inhabit Jesus's relationship with God.

And this week, we're going to turn our attention to another chapter entitled "Beginning a Friendship with God." And Martin starts the chapter by talking about his time as a Jesuit novice, so he's in training with all these spiritual practices. And he's struggling with feeling like he's not doing them correctly and wondering, "Am I doing this right? What's supposed to happen?" So he's come down with a case of impostor syndrome. Like everyone else has it together, and he's just faking it until he gets found out. And the advice his spiritual director gives him—Martin says this is the best advice he ever received about his spiritual life—is that "the way you think about friendships can help you think about, and deepen, your relationship with God."

So imagine you have a friend. What does that friendship need? Martin gives a few examples here. Friendships can take time. It can be difficult to maintain a friendship if neither of you can make any time. And it can be difficult to maintain a healthy spiritual life if we don't make time to work on it. Friendships are about learning. We discover new things about our friends as life progresses. Our relationships with God are like that, too. And another one, I thought this was the most interesting, was that friendships can handle silence. When you're friends with someone, you don't always have to be doing something or talking about something or working on something. Sometimes just being in their company can be enriching. And our relationships with God are like that, too.

But the one I want to unpack a little more today—mostly because it connects to the readings—is honesty. Maybe you've had that experience where you're having a really bad day. Your alarm didn't go off so you overslept, your cat's eye looks infected, the car wouldn't start, you got pulled over for speeding when you were getting passed by other people, and it's not even lunch, which you just realized you also forgot to pack. And after all that, someone asks you how your day is going. What do we say? "Good."

But how would you respond if your friend asked you? You would tell them what's actually going on. Those were silly examples, but imagine if you were going through a separation or if you just got a bad diagnosis or if you've been bouncing in and out of AA or if you're having a hard time living in your own head.

We often think of honesty as an inner disposition. As a character trait. But so often, our ability to be honest is shaped by who we're dealing with. We can be honest with people if we trust that they're committed to us. If I think I need to impress people to keep them around, then I'm going to paper over any problems I'm having in my life. When they ask me how it's going, I'll say, "Incredible." But if I know someone is going to be around, I can be honest with them. "You know, I'm kind of struggling right now."

And it's the same with God. We talked about this a little bit last week, but prayer is not something we do to try to get God to listen to us. We don't need to stress about keeping God's attention or worry about God getting tired of our company and looking for other

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more interesting people. As Augustine once said, God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. God is like the friend who sees through all our posturing and says, “Are you doing okay? What’s really going on?”

There’s a great story that Martin tells in this chapter about being at a retreat with some other priests and being asked to pray. And he’s dealing with some thorny issues at the time, so he’s really frustrated, and as part of his prayer, he asks, “How about some [expletive] help, God.” Martin recalls, “I thought my spiritual director, a wise and gentle Jesuit priest named Damian, would reproach me. Instead he said, ‘That’s a good prayer!’ I thought Damian was kidding. But he continued, ‘That’s a good prayer because it’s honest. God wants your honesty, Jim.’ God wants your honesty.

God’s desire for honesty is what we heard in today’s gospel reading. John the Baptist appears on the scene, and he has a very simple message. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Repenting means turning. It means going in a new direction. And since the kingdom of God is coming near in Jesus, John is trying to direct people’s attention and action toward what God is about to do. So to really hear John’s message, to turn toward the kingdom, you need to be honest about your life and the life of your community.

And sure enough, who are the people who listen to John? Who are the people who go out to the Jordan? The same kind of people that Jesus spent time with. People who were aware of their shortcomings. People who were suffering. People who wanted healing and wholeness. People who needed redemption. People who heard the call to turn toward the kingdom and took it as an invitation to new life.

And who are the ones who rejected John? Well, we heard in today’s reading. People who struggled with John’s call were people who were always obfuscating, coming up with myths about themselves. The kind of people who have never suffered from impostor syndrome. They heard John’s call to turn toward the kingdom and thought, “That guy must be talking to somebody else.”

John’s invitation is for all of us. And not just all of us like everyone in the room. But all of our selves. Not just the version of ourselves that we put on resumes. Not the version of ourselves that we share on social media. Not the version of ourselves that we put on when we come to church. But our true selves. The way we are when we’re with a friend who really gets us.

Remember that story about Martin’s overenthusiastic prayer? I shared it not just because I thought it was funny, but because it ties this all up nicely. Reflecting back on it, he writes, “[Because I was honest with God,] I felt God could now better accompany me, just as a good friend might. More accurately, I would now be able to allow God to accompany me.” Because I was honest, I could allow God to accompany me.

Whenever we pray honestly, we’re creating space for God to accompany us toward the kingdom of God. And it’s the compassion of God makes that repentance and honesty possible. The only sins we can really confess are the ones we trust will be forgiven. The only wounds we can share are the ones we believe can be healed. And the only lives that we can pursue fully are the ones we know can be redeemed.

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