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Evening Prayer – Monday, February 29, 2016

“Contemplating the Completion of the Day”

The English word “evening” comes from the same etymological root as the adjective “even,” which means level, calm, harmonious.ⁱ Now wouldn’t that be a good way to end the day, “evenly,” in a level, calm, harmonious way? Contemplating the completion of the day is about collecting your day, praying a collect around your day. I’ll use Jesus’ language after the feeding of the 5,000 (in John’s Gospel): “Gather up the fragments so that nothing be lost.”ⁱⁱⁱ Collect your day. Here are four reasons why contemplating your day past, in God’s presence, is so important for your ongoing conversion.

1. For one: the pace of life. If you set off on Interstate 35 and you looked out your car’s side window, you would see a great blur as you zoomed down the highway. On the one hand, the optic nerve is taking in the visual stimuli, but it’s happening so quickly you can’t focus, you can’t make sense out of it. It’s a blur. Life in western society is lot like that. Too much, too fast. Multiple platforms; virtual presence all over the grid. Your memory holds the information you need, but you must retrieve it. Do you remember [sic] the Greek word for remembrance? Anamnesis ἀνάμνησις. The sense of ἀνάμνησις is not like a string you tie around your finger so you remember to pick up a quart of milk on the way home. No; ἀνάμνησις is much more like a surgeon who re-members, who reconnects, who sutures something that has been severed off. Re-member. If you do not re-remember, you will miss a great, great deal that belongs to you. If you are only looking ahead, advancing, going from one thing to the next, to the next, to the next, you will completely miss the very different perspective you glean by looking back. Your life as students and scholars and practitioners of many different vocations will necessarily be full of advances. Your advances need to be complemented by retreats, where you remember, recover, restore, retrieve, redeem what is otherwise lost, and what is otherwise lost on you. Life can easily be too much, too fast to make sense of it in the moment. Contemplate the day that is past, in God’s presence. Re-member.
2. Another reason to contemplate your day that is past is because it’s very difficult to see clearly through tears. In your personal life and in your vocation, you likely encounter suffering regularly, maybe a daily dose or more. And you may cry, quite literally, or you may sigh and simply close your eyes, literally or symbolically. When we experience suffering, we want to get through the suffering, to get on the other side of suffering, to be free from the pain. We pray for this; we seek out health care professionals because of this; we take medicines and submit to various procedures to get away from suffering. Quite. On the other side of suffering, when we are well, on higher ground, or in less pain, there is usually something of enormous value to be retrieved from the crucible of suffering. In my own life – and consider whether this is also true for you? – my most highly developed gifts, abilities, sensitivities, understandings have come out of suffering: what I would never have chosen but could not avoid. What may have seemed, at the time, a black hole of suffering, is actually a gold mine full of treasure waiting to be

remembered, retrieved, recovered, and redeemed. Contemplate the day that is past. And if you make this a habit of your heart, the eyes of your heart will be enlightened with so much good that has come out of your past day, week, month, and year. So much good, even from so much bad.ⁱⁱⁱ Mine the gold that's to be redeemed from your suffering as you look back, in God's presence.

3. A third reason to contemplate your day that is past is simply a matter of integrity. If we take Jesus at his word, that he is with us always, even to the end, that's the way to end the day, and to end all our days. The real quest in life is to practice the presence of God as we navigate through the day. The *Rule of Life* for my monastic community calls this "praying your life."^{iv} Praying your life presumes your whole life matters to God, not just the major decisions, not just your cries for help or for forgiveness that come out of the depths of your soul, and not just your mountaintop experiences with God. Those extremes of life – the best of times and worst of times – certainly invite our prayer. However most of life is somewhere in the middle, sometimes in the muddle, and even there – *especially* there – there is an invitation to practice God's presence, to pray your life.

Contemplating life is a response to God's invitation to pray your life, the whole shebang. There's nothing too great or too small. So we pray about our cares for the world and its peoples, our friends and families, our enemies and those from whom we are estranged. We pray about our work, our successes and failures, our gifts and shortcomings. We pray about our sufferings and poverty, our passion and sexuality, our fears and resistances, our desires and dreams, our losses and grief. We pray not just the day, but also the night, our conscious mind but also our unconscious self.^v After all, we spend nearly a third of our entire life sleeping, which is a God-given need. Use the gift of sleep and rest to pray for God's ministrations, for God's direction, for God's inspiration, for God's healing, for God's hope. For those of us who are rather head strong, God may sometimes have a better chance getting through to us when we are sleeping, when our guard is down, than when we're up and navigating life full throttle.

How to contemplate the day? Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the 16th century founder of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, gave a formula in his *Spiritual Exercises* for collecting the day. He called this the Manifestation of Conscience, sometimes called the Manifestation of Consciousness, as a graceful way to contemplate the day that is past. At evening, review the day in God's presence. Here's my own paraphrase of St. Ignatius' formula:

1. Name and claim your gratitude. Review the progression of your day. If you keep a daily diary of appointments or a journal, this may prompt your memory. Otherwise just recall the progression of the day: the encounters you had; the abilities manifest by you and others; the kindnesses given and received; the provision at hand; the gift of your senses, i.e., what "sense" you make of the day. Name and claim your gratitude.

When you attend a concert or performance, something quite predictably happens at the end of the performance. There's no mention of it in the playbill, but it's going to happen most certainly. There's applause. Maybe raucous applause by the audience. Why is

this? It's not just because our mothers have taught us good manners, and it's not just to help make the performers feel good about themselves. It's also for members of the audience to complete the experience. Without the expression of gratitude, the experience would be incomplete for them. And so with the play of life. At the end of the day, name and claim your gratitude in God's presence. You will end the day, not empty but complete, and the experiences for which you're grateful will have increased thirty, sixty, perhaps a hundredfold.^{vi} Gratitude magnifies.

2. Review where you missed the mark: the interactions, altercations, interventions that went awry. Left unattended, those bad memories will imprison you, at least a part of you, and you need *all* of you to be fully alive. Those bad memories may leave you divided – one part of you fighting another part of you – or you may have a residue of shame, or a secret campaign of revenge, or a temptation to anesthetize the pain... which really needs to be lanced. Here's an invitation to practice what we preach: "If we confess our sins, [Jesus] who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."^{vii} Review where in the day you missed the mark, confess it, claim the cleansing freedom Jesus promises and provides. You may now find the clarity and freedom to make an amend with someone. That's not always needed... but sometimes it is. Review where you missed the mark.
3. And thirdly, offer a prayer of oblation, what you are lugging with you from your day's experience: the needs you encountered – yours and others' – the needs, the unanswered questions, the worries... As you review your day, what is unresful in you? This is your payer of oblation, offering to God the elements of your life and labor which are beyond you – at least in this moment – as you prepare to rest for the night, your God-given need to rest. Reportedly Pope John XXIII (1881-1963) had at his bed stand a short prayer that read: "There's a lot of problems in your church, Lord. It's your church and you're going to have to deal with them. I'm going to bed."

You end your day as if it were the end of your life – it may well be – with a prayer of oblation from your life and labor. This prayer will help you rest in the peace of Christ for the night. This prayer is also a wellspring of hope, should God awaken you to the morrow. You live your life as a gift, not as a given. Should God give you one more day – I'll use here the language of St. Ignatius – as much as one more day "to praise, and reverence, and serve God," which is the end for which we have been created, you have every assurance of Jesus' promise he will be with you, and that you will have the power and provision you need.^{viii} Presume God thinks you're up to it if you're given as much as one more day to praise, and reverence, and serve God.

As you contemplate the end of your day, pray your life; gather up the fragments. This is an evening prayer. It will even your day and convert your life for the better. Much better.

Here's a problem with about I'm encouraging you to do: you're too busy. You already have *so* much to do. You don't have time for this. If that's the case... I'm going to push on you here as your older, devoted brother. For starters, it's not your time. It's God's time. Time is a creation, as are you, and the only way you're going to tap the abundant life that Jesus promises is to live in sync with the terms of life. There's enough time. Time is not the enemy; time is God's

creation as are you. Make peace with time, and you'll have the time of your life. A second urgent reason to contemplate the close of the day, to pray for the evening of your life, is the risk you run if you don't. The risk isn't that you will burn out – you may – but there's something that will likely happen before then. You will get lost... which is why Jesus tells so many parables about being lost. Don't get lost.

Contemplating your life at the close of the day will hone your soul's attentiveness to hallowing the course of your entire day. I said at the outset there are four reasons why contemplating your day at the day's end is important and life-changing for the better. It's about:

1. Your thanksgiving: what you might have taken for granted you now take with gratitude, which will enlarge the gift manifold
2. Your contrition: where you missed the mark, leaving a residue in your memory that will otherwise keep you locked up, or armed, or distracted, or infected;
3. Your oblation: offering back to God the elements of your life and labor entrusted to you as your day, perhaps your life, comes to an end.

And then, a fourth reason why to contemplate your day in God's presence, your evening prayer.

4. You're worth it.

ⁱ The English “evening,” from the Old English *aefen* and “even” from *efen*.

ⁱⁱ John 6:12.

ⁱⁱⁱ “The eyes of your heart,” a riff on Ephesians 3:14-21.

^{iv} “Prayer and Life”: chapter 22 of *The SSJE Rule of Life*: <http://ssje.org/ssje/category/rule-of-life/>

^v These descriptive phrases about our invitation to prayer come from SSJE's *Rule of Life*:

<http://ssje.org/ssje/category/rule-of-life/>

^{vi} A riff on Matthew 13:8, 23; Mark 4:8.

^{vii} 1 John 1:9.

^{viii} This comes from Ignatius of Loyola's “Foundation and First Principle” in his *Spiritual Exercises*.