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Mark 6:45-52

Marking the Hours with Prayer:

The "Ninth Hour" – A Time To Refocus



Golden Verse: Isaiah 9:2

"As you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Ephesians 5:19-20

Finding ways to offer praise to God throughout the day is the goal of this six-week series, drawing from Paul's admonition to the Ephesians, *"giv[e] thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

However, this is not simply spontaneous prayer, that is whatever leaps into your mind. We will discover that through better understanding the phases of Jesus' life we will be better equipped to pray our way through the day.

The prayer tradition of the *Divine Office* is the pattern we draw from, which has names for the different prayer times of the day. Today we look at the so-called *Ninth Hour (None)* prayer time.

In Biblical times the day was counted from the time of sunrise. The *None hour*, refers to the ninth hour after sunrise or about three in the afternoon.

Over the centuries there have been many metaphorical meanings attached to the ninth hour. Listen to this description:

The writers of the [Middle Ages](#) have sought for...mystical explanations of the Hour of None...how, like the sun which sinks on the horizon at the hour of None, man's spirit tends to lower itself also, he is more open to temptation, and it is the time the [demon](#) selects to try him.

...nine was considered by the ancients an imperfect number, an incomplete number...Nine was also the number of mourning...some [persons](#) believe that it is the hour at which our [first parents](#) were driven from the Garden of [Paradise](#).

The metaphorical ninth hour of Jesus' life was the time when the crowds were following Him in throngs. The first phase was His time as a child in the temple as He explored His relationship to His heavenly father. The second phase was His baptism and time in the wilderness when He was commissioned for ministry. In this third phase He has hit His messianic groove.

He calmed the sea, fed five thousand, taught crowds from a mountain top, and had

gathered His team – the disciples – to be key leaders in His ministry. He was busy! So in between these events He would go off alone to be in prayer, to stay focused.

It was critical – not only was He drained, but because of His success and fame, enemies were beginning to plot His demise. He needed to be both as wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove. His mind needed to be sharp, and His soul needed to remain pure and steadfast.

At this time in Jesus' life Sadducees were laying heretical traps for Him, the crowd sought to crown Him as an earthly king, but perhaps most trying was the continued ineptitude of His disciples.

If Jesus needed to be careful at this hour how all the more important it is for us.

For us, the ninth hour is the time of day when most of the thrust of work has happened and there is a pause in the midst of it. Your patience and your coffee have worn down; as your energy wanes it becomes harder to finish the day's work with gusto and focus. It is a time when we are susceptible to lapses in our moral behavior. Like driving a car on a long trip, you don't want to be so drained you cause a wreck, so praying the 3 p.m. prayer is critical. As Galatians encourages us, "*And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.*" (Galatians 6: 9)

If we become too weary, too drained of our spiritual sustenance – of our peace, we will lash out, make bad choices, cost ourselves people, capital, dignity, and more. Perhaps turning to Colossians at this time of day will help, "*Whatever you do, work at it with all your*

heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters." (Colossians 3: 23)

This is where Catholic brothers excel.

Years ago, I visited the St. Bernard's Abby in Cullman, Alabama. Last week I shared the story of the 5 a.m. Latin chanting. But the entire visit was enthralling.

The monks graciously welcomed us into their daily routine – which was profound in its clarity of purpose. They wake up at 5 a.m. and chant the Psalms for an hour and a half. At lunch they continue where they left off and go another hour, and then again in the evening.

Then they wake up the next morning and repeat, FOREVER! Lest you think they are slackers; their free prayer takes up another hour or so in the afternoon between work. This is at the ninth hour we have been discussing. And the way they bridge this pivotal part of the day is genius. Rather than praying for help and strength, they lean into prayer that expresses the love and glory of God and the method they employ is called *Lectio Divina*.

Previously I had experienced *Lectio* through Protestants and to tell you the truth I was not impressed. However, after listening to Brother Marcus, I realized protestant *Lectio* might be something like expecting Budweiser to produce a stellar French wine, say 1985 Châteaux Marguax.

Brother Marcus, President of St. Bernard's school, said, "*Lectio is how monks pray. Lectio reverses the scripture, to go back to the experience that prompted the writing of the scripture to begin with.*" Think about this for a moment.

Anyone who has seen the movie *Amadeus*, about Mozart's musical genius and personal failings despite its historical inaccuracies leaves the movie with a profound and powerful sense that this man was filled with incredible genius and passion and because of it his music has endured for centuries. Imagine the inspiration that must have filled his soul.

But Holy scripture has endured for millennia. These texts are so powerful that people have...

...devoted their lives in service to it;

...given away fortunes to follow it;

...been transformed from evil into good;

...given their lives to preserve it.

With such power in these pages imagine the inspiration that filled the authors when they wrote it. Brother Marcus is telling us that *Lectio* seeks to draw the reader back to that moment. To feel the same power and love of God the authors felt when they wrote it.

This certainly was pure love for God, but it didn't quite seem to me to live up to the full admonition from Jesus to love God with our heart *and our neighbor*, which is required in the ninth hour of the day. After all, Jesus spent time in prayer but also deeply engaged in the matters of the world at this time.

Then Brother Marcus led us to the other side of the monastery, the Ave Maria Grotto which I must confess I loved. To see these hundreds of replicas, 3-5 feet tall, of some of the greatest cathedrals and basilicas of all time made over the course of decades from whatever materials Brother Zoettl could find, conveyed a

patience and fortitude far beyond my capacities. These were his gift to the people of Cullman, Alabama who could not travel to these sacred sites but by visiting this Grotto they could feel as if they had.

As we were gazing at this marvel, we saw a crusty old curmudgeon hopping around some of the more dilapidated looking buildings. After some conversation we discovered he had taken up Brother Zoettl's mantle – well, sort of. He was not a brother but an 84-years-young grounds worker who spent the past twenty-eight years repairing and maintaining the artwork. We asked how he managed to keep all these buildings up and he retorted, "*Not with much help I tell you. There's too much ora and not enough labora around this place.*" He was referring to the plaques that hung over most every entrance in the monastery which simply said, "Ora et Labora". That is: prayer and work.

For the monks he felt there was too much prayer. But perhaps we have the opposite problem: too much Labora and not enough Ora. If you pause in the ninth hour from your *Labora* and devote yourselves to *Ora*, perhaps we can find the same moments those Monks seek to know in their free prayer time.

Listen to Brother Marcus' description of the fourth stage of *Lectio Divina-Contemplatio*:

After reading for about an hour or so perhaps once every few years you reach this stage and it is sheer gift. At this moment you stop being in control, you let go of the will, it is a sense of grace. The mystics speak allegorically like a heart on fire, a deep quiet, or like being assumed

into sapphire light. They revived this practice in 1902 after the ban was lifted.

Apparently, they banned this practice because people were loving God too intensely! Would that were our problem. A blessed one indeed. Amen.