

CONNECT! SUNDAY REFLECTION

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time | For Sunday, September 2nd, 2018

Wings to Fly

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Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23



I had a professor in the seminary who was a hobby ornithologist. He would often tell stories of experiences he had as a ranger working for the United States Forest Service. He would share stories of bird sightings and was even able to distinguish various bird calls.

St. John of the Cross uses this analogy to describe the state of the soul. He understands that the nature of the bird is to fly — just like our souls. But unlike our souls, birds are not naturally hindered by anything in their flight, lest they are grounded and unable to fly. Maybe there's a string tied to its foot, so its natural desire to fly is impeded by the predicament. St. John is right to say that in order for the bird to fly, it must be loosened from its tether — the string.

My soul is not hindered literally by a string, but rather by something else. Jesus tells us what that “something” is: “From within people, from their hearts come evil thoughts ...” (Mk 7:21). Let's just stop here and consider this one phrase apart of any pathological connotations. Jesus is saying that there is something within my soul that prevents it from flight. What is it?

When in the silence of prayer here at the monastery, I am able to still the constant chatter of interior noise. I can be quite shocked to realize that my thoughts are sinful — not diabolical but not always virtuous either — in more ways than I care to admit! I find myself quick to judge people negatively for failing to keep to their word. I find myself haughty by using my eloquence in theological discussions. I can imprison myself into gloomy dispositions because of hurtful experiences of the past. I can be resigned into hopelessness when I am unable to control situations to my liking. I feel agitated and sometimes outraged by the current news. But I feel justified with these thoughts because it makes me feel powerful and righteous.

Matthew the Poor has this to say about my situation, which I'm sure is yours, too:

“There is an element that weighs down heavily upon the soul. It pulls it down to the earth and brings its motion to a halt. It

deprives it of its freedom and hampers its expansion and growth. Once we discover this element, we will be able to focus our attention, struggle, and prayers upon it until we are set free. As for this dangerous and hostile power, it is nothing but the human ego."

The spiritual life includes recognizing and confessing those patterns of my human ego — disfigured by the Fall — that has a tendency to serve itself, rather than God. (When was the last time you went to the Sacrament of Confession?) My ego prefers the autonomy of individuality, not the freedom of submission to God. This wrestling match is a lifelong battle ... one that is fought not from despair but from hope. I have hope because of who Jesus is, what he has done, and what he promises to me. The thoughts will be there — I am only human — but these thoughts don't have to be persistent, controlling, and overwhelming.

The cross of Jesus gives us a way to overcome the power of evil or negative thoughts through the power of His Spirit. The more I can train my mind to engage daily life — people and situations — with Jesus' thoughts about people and situations, the less influence these evil or negative thoughts have over me ... and the more my life exudes love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (cf. Gal 5:22-23).

My soul has wings that can fly in a wind current like that! Imagine what life could be like if our souls could soar like that of a majestic eagle or the tenacity of a hawk in the company of other birds soaring in the way nature designed them to fly.

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PRAYER

*Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
All things are passing away:
God never changes.
Patience obtains all things
Whoever has God lacks nothing;
God alone suffices.*

—Prayer of St. Teresa of Avila