

The Power of Sharing Personal Struggles and Insights

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” ~ Matthew 11:28

You know, the Gospels and the heavenly doctrines are full of references to the importance of taking our concerns to the Lord – in prayer, reflection, and reading the Word. The doctrines in particular are full of references to the importance of *self-examination* in the light of the Word. What we *don't* see so much is the value of *discussing spiritual things together*, especially sharing personal insights and struggles with one another. But these disciplines *are* discussed – from a couple of different angles – and we know that they can be very helpful, if not real life-savers at critical times.

First of all, with respect to self-examination, we are often reminded about how challenging this can be, since we have an obvious conflict of interest. In fact, it's hard to be objective about ourselves since we generally think pretty well of our intentions and therefore of our actions, too. But other people bring other perspectives, which may not be quite as complimentary – not that we want to encourage criticism, *but we need objective feedback* (which, by the way, certainly can be given in a respectful and supportive way). We read, for example, in *Heaven and Hell*,

“...it is impossible for those who are in the love of self to know what their ruling love is, because they love what is their own, and call their evils goods; and the falsities to which they incline and by which they confirm their evils they call truths. *And yet, if they were willing, they might know it from others who are wise, and who see what they themselves do not see*” (HH #487:1).

The point here is that if (at least from conscience) we want that feedback we need to be willing to be vulnerable enough to ask for it, or in any case to accept it, *along with the conversation that inevitably follows*. In fact, this pretty clearly implies a kind of openness about discussing our spiritual insights and challenges that has not been particularly common in our church.

Of course the instruction in the Sermon on the Mount not to pray or do our charitable works “to be seen by men” may be taken as clear warnings not to share anything in a self-promoting way, but if our sharing is for the purpose of expressing grief or getting counsel there are other teachings that give comforting direction. “Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...” (Matt. 5:1-6). Certainly these are internal states reflecting a longing for what is good and true, but they are also expressed in our relationships with other people *as we seek that goodness and truth*. And yes, we must be seeking from the Lord Himself, but notice how much more *real* and powerful that is when we do so openly *with other people*. “Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the peacemakers.” Again, these are internal states, but they are not real unless we are expressing them in our relationships with others. One way to show mercy, for example, is to allow our own weakness and vulnerability to be known – in an appropriate way and context, of course, simply by comforting someone with the admission, if it's true, that we've struggled with something similar, and then – maybe – sharing what we found helpful in that struggle.

We are, of course, naturally and appropriately reserved about exposing our weaknesses to others, but when we humbly open up and discover that others share the same weaknesses it makes us feel less alone, less out of synch with the rest of the world, less depressed, and less desperate. One passage in the book, *True Christian Religion* that speaks to this makes reference to the Catholic custom of confessing sins before a priest. The point is made that this is not *necessary*, since the Lord Himself is the only one who can forgive sins. “Still,” we read, “it does no harm for one whose conscience is burdened, to enumerate his sins before a minister of the church for the sake of absolution, *in order that his burden may be lightened*; for by this means he is led into the habit of examining himself, and reflecting on the evils of each day” (TCR 539:e).

In a similar way we can confess our sins to each other, first of all hoping for reconciliation if we have offended a specific person (which is directly taught in Matthew 5:23-26), but also – again, within an appropriate context – hoping for some relief and consolation by bringing the issues out into the open.

It may seem a bit of a stretch, but consider what the Writings say about why evils are permitted in the world in the first place. We read that it is “for the sake of salvation,” in that we cannot really know them and the extent of their damaging consequences unless they are allowed to appear openly in this world. But when they ARE exposed, then the understanding can be engaged in a way that prompts repentance and real change *from within*, which ensures that the work can be done without interfering with anybody’s free will (DP #275-284). This teaching clearly applies in cases of personal sharing, that is, personal admissions of some weakness or problem, in that it brings it out into the open where it can be discussed intelligently and with the perspective that we can’t possibly bring to it on our own.

Notice, though, that this sharing does not require a solution from the listener. In fact, most of the time a given solution is NOT what we want when we open up about our challenges. After all, if it’s a serious concern we’ve probably been stewing about it for a long time, turning it over and over in our minds and still not seeing what to do. The benefit of confiding in someone is not that we expect a perfect answer, but that we get a better perspective so that we ourselves can be the agents for change. This means that we don’t all have to be trained psychologists or theologians to be able to help each other; we just have to know how to listen, that is, actively listen so that we can assure someone that we are really hearing and understanding the issues.

Of course women tend to know all this intuitively, and are often far more comfortable than men about sharing personal concerns. But it’s good for all of us, and so we all need to practice the art of careful, respectful listening for one another. As Paul said in his letter to the Galatians,

“Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. *Bear one another’s burdens*, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. For each one shall bear his own load” (Gal. 6:1-5).

This may seem like self-contradictory advice (are we sharing our burdens or not?) but in fact it’s perfectly consistent with the teachings about Providence and free will that we just referenced, and the beauty of it is that when we share in an appropriate way we do not expect or give definitive solutions; only the Lord can do that. Rather we accept the burden of knowing and discussing a problem without trying to impose an answer, and certainly without blabbing about it to

others who are not involved. The reference to “considering ourselves lest we also be tempted” is not so much about falling into a similar disorder as it is about adopting a sphere of authority and trying to control something we obviously can’t control in another person’s life.

In Genesis when the Lord questioned Cain about his brother, Abel, Cain said, “I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9). And of course we all recognize this as the ugly impertinence that it was, but it will serve its purpose if it reminds us of the truth that we really ARE responsible for one another, to the extent that we are commanded to love and do good *even to those who hate and abuse us* (Matt. 5:43-45).

But look. So far we have been talking only about sharing our burdens. What about sharing our insights and blessings? You know the Lord said, “Let your light so shine that men may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Light corresponds to truth, and so even though the teaching focuses on good works, it is clear that the reference is to good works done in truth, good works done according to the Lord’s Word. How else could He say we are “the light of the world” when actually He Himself is that light (John 8:12 & 9:5)?

The challenge is, how to let His light shine through us without calling attention to ourselves.

As an analogy, think of a lamp in your living room. Unless it is really ostentatious it will not itself be a focus of attention but a source of light that provides for a focus *on the other uses* in the room. Of course, if the light starts flickering, or changing colors every few seconds, it will call attention to itself, but if it simply shines, warmly and steadily without interruption, it will serve its own use along with the other uses in the room by simply being there, in the background.

Does this mean we always have to be in the background with other people? No, but the Lord did say, “Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant, and whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave” (Matt. 20:26-27). These are strong words, and warn very directly about trying to assume too much control. The point is to serve. And to serve is to meet other people’s needs, not to press our own agendas. Again, one way to do this is to humbly offer a personal insight or observation based on experience that can shed light on whatever issue may be at hand – not to say, “This is what YOU need to do,” but “This is something I found helpful,” or “This is something that might somehow be related.”

By the way, one of the wonderful things about truly wise counsel is that often other people can help us see strengths *in ourselves* that we may not fully appreciate. This can give us courage or confidence that might not otherwise seem possible. And of course, what others do for us in that vein, we can also do for them: - look for the good, listen for the opportunity to praise or affirm, acknowledge their own positive thought or affection, and shine a light on the whole situation so that their faith, their hope and their charity can flourish.

The teaching of *Divine Love and Wisdom* #47, which you heard earlier, is truly profound: -

“Love consists in this that its own is another’s; and to feel another’s joy as joy in oneself, this is to love. *But to feel one’s joy in another and not the other’s joy in oneself, this is not to love, for the latter is loving one’s self*, the former loving the neighbor. The two kinds of love are diametrically opposed to one another. Either kind of love does indeed conjoin; and it does not appear that to love oneself, *that is, to love oneself in another*, disjoins. But yet it does disjoin to such a degree that, so far as anyone has loved another in this manner, so far he afterwards hates him.”

This passage really challenges us to focus on the good, even when a person isn't *being* good – not that we're called upon to respect anything bad, but at the very least we can respect a person's free will. Note the part about feeling one's joy in another, and *not* the other's joy in oneself. The same could be said for another's sadness, or another's grief. But let's stay with joy. The teaching is that *to feel one's own joy in another is to love oneself in the other*. But to feel *another's* joy as joy in oneself is truly to love the other. So how can we do that?

Surprisingly, we can do it by recognizing, acknowledging, and feeling good about the joy other people feel in *whatever they do*.

Really? *Whatever?* Yes, whatever. Ironically this is one of the reasons that the Lord tolerates hell: He feels good about the fact that people in hell can still enjoy their miserable lives because they really like being that way. He feels good about the fact that they have chosen to BE that way and that they can carry on however they like *without harming or endangering anyone in heaven*, on the other side of the great gulf. Sure, they suffer, but that's not HIS fault; He doesn't do it to them; they get their jollies by doing it to each other, and that is acceptable to the Lord because His goal for all people is that we choose our own way of life – along with its positive or negative consequences.

But... can we, like the Lord, feel the joy of another as joy in ourselves, even when we don't respect what they're doing? Well, why not? The question may be relevant to many situations in our daily lives, but most of all it relates to the ways we support one another, the ways we listen and talk to one another, the ways we share both our struggles and our blessings. We certainly don't have to like, endorse, condone or support anything that we can clearly see is wrong. But if we want to feel the peace and presence of the angels we must learn not only to accept the joy but somehow to feel the joy – or the sadness or the grief – even of a trouble-maker as joy, sadness or grief in ourselves. That way the doors of communication are kept open, and as long as we are in this world we can hope for improvement, real improvement through the just application of free will and understanding.

In conclusion about the value of sharing our spiritual joys and concerns with one another, please recall the teaching that the lives of angels in heaven really are “open books:” they have nothing to hide, and everything – innocently – to share. Of course *they* don't have to be concerned about anybody taking advantage of them, so they have much greater freedom in this regard than we do. Still, practice makes perfect, and if we don't want to open up now, what makes us think we'll want to do so in the next life? Surely there are people in every one of our lives that we can trust – not only to help us carry our burdens, but to give and receive the counsel we all need to stay strong in the face of all our many worldly needs and struggles and temptations. Surely there are some who can help us even as we help them come to the Lord so that HE can give us rest.

Amen.

Lessons: *Mark 2:1-12*
Children's talk on helping one another

1 *Samuel 11:1-11*
Arcana Caelestia #2023:1 and *Divine Love & Wisdom* #47
See also *Heaven & Hell* #268 & 399 (alt. lessons)