

PRAYER IN THE CLASSROOM: AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH

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Introduction

In this paper, I will describe an experiment with prayer in the classroom, and then articulate the underlying principles and purpose. In October 2019, I was invited by Teanna Sunberg, the education coordinator for Central Europe, to come to their field with one goal, model for them how to integrate a dialogical prayer approach in the classroom. For this to happen, Svetlana Khobnya, New Testament teacher at NTC Manchester, would give a teaching, and at the end of these lessons, I would model how to develop prayer exercises.

Outline of the Teaching

The first teaching reviewed the story of 2 Kings 5, the story of Naaman the Syrian. Svetlana gave a dynamic lecture, having people read the text, interacting with the students (us, educators for the most part in this case) through questions and dialogs, in order to help us see different facets of the text.

At the end of the lecture, I invited the students to do a prayer experiment: “imagine you are part of the story of Naaman. For instance, imagine you are with the prophet Elijah or that you are one of the servants of Naaman, or even Naaman, and witness how God is at work through this story.” The students were encouraged to imagine the story, as a multi-sensorial inner experience, not as an observer from above (as if they were God) but as participants, with the possibility for them to interact as participants of the story. At the end of this “living the story from the inside,” I invited the students to ask in their hearts to Jesus what he would like for them to learn out of this story. Then, I invited the students to share how they felt, what they perceived God was telling them. While some shared rather abstract concepts, with a strong rational element, others were more personal and open to share how they felt and what they perceived they were learning from God through this story.

The second teaching addressed the different accounts of the life of the king Manasseh. Svetlana had the students read the two very different accounts from 2Kings 21 and 2 Chronicles 33. In 2Kings 21, Manasseh is presented as a completely evil king with no positive element. In 2 Chronicles 33, the story of this king is more complete, and presents his exile to Babylon and his repentance and how he returns and tries to do good things, removing some of the idolatrous practices that he had previously encouraged or established. This is one of the places in Scriptures where there is a significant tension or at least apparent discrepancy between the two accounts. Svetlana led the students in a very dialogical way, so that they could reflect on these differences and what it meant at an hermeneutical level. She then gave some more information on how the Bible texts were brought together.

At the end of this lecture, I reminded the students that in the days of Jesus, the different books of the Old Testament were often different scrolls. I then invited the students to imagine that they were before Jesus, and that they held in each hand one scroll, one for 2 Kings

and one for 2 Chronicles. I then invited the students to ask Jesus what he would like for them to learn from these differences and common points. After this prayer/imagination experiment, I invited the students to share with each other, and we finished with a prayer asking the Lord to help us learn from him and with him as we study Scriptures.

Rationale and Elaboration

Since Renaissance, and with the Enlightenment, education has focused heavily on the human reasoning and critical thinking. In our Nazarene education, we have already begun more than ten years ago to move away from this content-based, reason-led education, through an outcome-based education grounded in what we call the 4 Cs (Content, Context, Competence and Character).¹ This is a starting point, in order to challenge an anthropology that we can call Platonist or rationalist, that perceives the persons as rational beings. As James K. A. Smith puts it, “A dominant model, as old as Plato but rebirthed by Descartes and cultivated through modernity, sees the human person as fundamentally a thinking thing”². This defective cognitivist anthropology leads to a pedagogy focused on logic and reason. It can be replaced by a better anthropology, more in line with the neuroscience understanding of brain functions, that describes human beings as persons of desire³. This anthropology focuses on humans as persons of desire, and pedagogy then must lead students in their desires. Using the imagination is then a very important tool for helping students to engage all their senses, and thus allowing their desires to be shaped at a deeper level. Imagination is not only about images, but about an inner multi-sensorial experience, like what people experience in dreams. This can then lead to deeper insights, for the person, of the concept or story considered. That is one of the paradoxes of education: a deeper understanding requires to move beyond an “objective” and rational knowledge, growing into a more multi-faceted and relational knowledge, through a multi-sensorial interaction. In essence, reason

¹ Section 529.3, “General Curriculum Areas for Ministerial Preparation,” in *Manual, 2017-2021: History · Constitution · Government · Sacraments and Rituals*, Church of the Nazarene online (official) edition (accessed 12/20/2019) <http://2017.manual.nazarene.org/paragraph/p529/s3/>

² James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 41.

³ Smith *Desiring the Kingdom*, 46. This focus on desire is a good option. He does not approve the option of an anthropology based on the human person as believer, which I would still advocate, as long as the understanding of faith is relational, involving not only “conceptual belief” as often understood in texts like Hebrews 11:1, but more as listening faith, as exemplified in Paul’s definition of faith in Romans 10:17: Faith comes by hearing, and hearing from the word of Christ”. This correction to our anthropology will be of strategic importance, as we learn to articulate our education practices in line with the goal of Christlike discipleship.

alone is not able to reach a deep understanding of a story or concept, without the assistance of emotions and sensorial experience.

Purpose

In the first experience, concerning the story of Naaman, the purpose is for the persons to experience “from the inside” the story, thus allowing a possible encounter with God that involves their whole being, and does not limit itself to a rational approach. This experience, and possible encounter, fosters both a deeper cognitive understanding and a closer relationship with God. The students are invited to integrate this story in their relationship with God or engage their relationship with God during this story. In doing so, we move from analytical knowledge to relational knowledge and possible spiritual insight⁴.

Having students share with each other has multiple goals. The first goal is for the teacher to know how the experiment went for the students, in order to assess if there is a need to correct or add to the experiment. A second goal is for students to learn from each other’s experience. In this process, some students will still share at a rational level, and it is of no use to correct that, but rather to validate what is shared. Some students will share about personal experiences which could be disconnected from the story. Some other students will speak of how they felt challenged/encouraged as they lived the story ‘from the inside’. Here, as the teacher, my role is to open a space of dialog in which I can encourage the experiments that are showing the strongest connections of the students’ own story and the biblical story. The students’ involvement in the biblical story, in other contexts, could be called worship or part of a liturgical dynamic.

Such an exercise communicates to the students that they don’t need to leave their faith in God at the door of the classroom, but instead that their relationship with God is at the foundation of their intellectual processing and development. It also helps students to put in perspective rational knowledge, not as the ‘best’ form of knowledge, but as a faithful and important assistant in their learning from God and with God in this world. This understanding of reason as an assistant rather than a master of desires and relationships is definitely more in line with our present neuroscientific understanding of brain functions⁵.

⁴ In the Hebrew Bible, we can find the distinction between these two types of knowledge in Proverbs 3:5-6, related to the Hebrew verbs ‘bin’ (analytical knowledge) and ‘yada’ (relational knowledge) “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding (binah, same root as ‘bin’). In all your ways know him (‘yada’) and he will make your path straight. (personal literal translation from the Hebrew Massoretic text).

⁵ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage 2013). See for instance chapters 2 and 3 of this very insightful book.

The second exercise, concerning the apparent dissonance between 2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 33 is designed to help students reconcile what could be a problematic point for their faith. When two biblical texts seem to contradict each other, one option is to choose the rational pathway, trying to justify this dissonance since the Bible is often described as the foundation of our Christian faith. Some books have been written with this implicit approach⁶. Another approach is to remind persons that the center of our faith is not a book but a person, Jesus Christ. This is the implicit foundation behind the exercise of us facing Jesus with the two scrolls in the imagination experiment / prayer exercise. In full agreement with Luther, we can then help students to realize that all Scriptures lead to Jesus, and that we interpreting Scriptures is as much a spiritual endeavor as an intellectual practice. Jesus is one, and our journey as disciples of Jesus is to remain in him and him in us. For this to happen, we must first learn who Jesus is, through the Gospels and the New Testament. We can then learn to enter into this heart fellowship with Jesus through the Holy Spirit in all we do, thus also in reading Scriptures. What Jesus says in John 14:26⁷ then takes all its meaning, and a more holistic learning experience is encouraged.

⁶John W. Haley, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2004)

⁷John 14:26 “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” (ESV)