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Isaiah 40:21-31, Psalm 30, Mark 1:29-39
"The Synergy of Prayer"

The longest final in Grand Slam history took place in the Australian Open between Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal last week. It was 5 hours and 53 minutes.

Imagine playing your hardest in the toughest tennis match in the world after going at it for over five hours. It was an amazing sight.

From a spiritual point-of-view there was one inescapable feature in the final minutes. Djokovic, the eventual winner, spent much of his time in these exhausting minutes kissing the cross around his neck, crossing himself, or holding the string section of his racket in a praying hands gesture. It was obvious that he was calling to God for help.

In Isaiah we read, "God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Djokovic brought that home to millions of viewers last week.

Another fairly young man knew this text well because he too called on God in a time of great exhaustion. We read in the Gospels that Jesus began his ministry with a bang: "That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons..."

"In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

"And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons."

In the middle of his very exhausting ministry Jesus turns to God for sustenance and strength. His engagement in ministry and drawing aside to pray and going back out into ministry is what I have called "the synergy of prayer." Some have called it the inward and outward journey. One's ministry in the world needs prayer to be effective and prayer is enlivened when it responds to situations in life.

Back to the tennis match: One might ask whether Djokovic was praying to win. Maybe he was but I think he was asking God to get him through the “night” much like the Psalmist’s statement that “weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

A side bar: What about Djokovic’s win? It is said that if an archer aims at a target he or she will miss the target 95% of the time if the archer did not practice his or her skill. If the archer practiced regularly she or he would hit the target 95% of the time. Practice makes perfect. If the archer included prayer the likelihood of hitting the target is even greater because prayer calms, strengthens and provides space for the practiced skill to break through.

Visually speaking, Djokovic had the edge in the Australian Open. If Nadal was praying silently they would have been equal on the prayer front and their skill, fitness and luck on the day would have been the decider. Mostly, it’s the more skilled player who wins. But if the players are equally matched then prayer helps enormously.

When we pray we feel God’s presence and celebrate our wins; we are consoled in losses and inspired to carry on and do better the next time.

The synergy of prayer energizes our prayer life *and* our ministry, whatever our ministry might be: our work-a-day world, our life at home, our work in the community, our peace marches or service in a soup kitchen, etc.

Our work in the world pushes us to prayer - in a quiet place as Jesus does or on-the-spot as Djokovic does. And, by and large, prayers have a context and a reason.

The cycle of prayers which I call “the synergy of prayer” might also be called “prayers that nurture” a phrase from Flora Slosson Wuellner’s book, *Prayer, Stress, and Our Inner Wounds*. She shares this prayer with persons who are in deep stress, fatigued, drained of energy, ill, or convalescent. Prayer helps. From their situations they go to prayer and prayer eases the pain and helps them cope and reintegrate in life.

She outlines a prayer of nurture in two parts which we will practice in our Lenten Spiritual Practice sessions.

She calls the first part a “soaking prayer.” It helps us physically. One can use the image of light which is Wuellner’s favorite (and mine) or water, wind, color, healing hands, wings, and so on. In this prayer we do not ask for anything special. We just rest, let go, breathe in, and soak up the healing light (or water, or wind, and so on) of God which embraces us. When we open ourselves to the healing presence of God, the deep action of divine love flows into every part of our lives. In this prayer we rest in it, breathe it, and allow it to work its transforming renewal within us.

She calls the second part the “prayer of the heart.” Just as the soaking prayer envisages the light surrounding us and flowing through us, so this prayer envisages the healing power expanding from within. In this prayer one pictures a river of light quietly flowing through one’s whole body, calming, relaxing, releasing every part. Again, if the light

image is not right for you, think of God's healing water flowing around your body or a gentle wind blowing through you.

As I mentioned, this prayer will be practiced in the Lenten Wednesday evening spiritual practice sessions. The sessions proceed after supper. It's a wonderful journey to Easter. Faith, Mari and I will share practices on the five evenings.

Wuellner stresses that her prayer can be done anytime and any way. Jesus did it in a quiet place in the early morning. Djokovic did his version of it on the tennis court. We can do it at work, home or in the park. The important thing about prayer for Wuellner is the relationship we have with God and God is not that concerned with disciplines of prayer (although disciplines of time and place can be helpful).

Finally, we are nurtured in worship and especially in Holy Communion which we celebrate today. As we participate in Christ's body symbolized in bread and wine (juice actually) may we feel God's sustenance and strength for our continued engagement in God's good work in the world. Amen.