

The Prayer of Last Resort

By Linda Borecki

You know the joke — well, it isn't really a joke, it's more like real life — about the Christian who spied a friend approaching on the street and thought, "Oh, no! Here comes Phoebe. I promised to pray for Phoebe ... *Dear Lord, please be with Phoebe* ... Hi, Phoebe! I've been praying for you!"

Why is it that "Lord, *be with* [insert name here]" prayers are sometimes the prayers of last resort, when we don't know what to pray, haven't thought out what to pray, don't care to pray ...?

"Dear Lord," intones the prayer leader, "please be with Sheri who has cancer (... and our minds starts to wander ... we all know she is doomed, doomed, doomed, so we won't bother You with a healing ask), and please be with the Noodlestein family in their challenges (... of a prodigal daughter who is in this mess because of her own folly and clueless parents — so what else is there to do except be with them regardless), and please be with the church council as we meet Tuesday (why don't I have that report ready yet? — oh, right, the John Cusack movie fest was this weekend, my, why hasn't that man won an Oscar yet?)."

It wasn't always this way.

Back in biblical times, "The Lord be with you!" was a warm greeting, a prayer, and an affirmation all rolled into one. Boaz greeted his workers in the field with "The LORD be with you!" and they called back "The LORD bless you!" — which He did in the form of Boaz's future wife Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, present with the harvesters that day (Ruth 2). It was a glad salutation with eye contact and closeness among acquaintances, as well as a short prayer for God's presence and blessing to rest upon them and be active in their lives.

All in five little words: *The Lord be with you*.

In the Early Church, those first two or three centuries after Christ's death and resurrection, "The Lord be with you" was the greeting prayer of choice among Christians. It was accompanied by a gentle gesture of open hands lifted up

and out by the greeter toward the greetees. "And with your spirit" was the response [*The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, c. 215]. A believer was practicing — purposefully acknowledging — the delight of the presence of the God who draws near to us. It marked the beginning of corporate worship and an affirmation that the Spirit of Christ would indeed permeate and rest on the assembly. It was a prayer of first resort.

A wise pastor once told me of a devotional exercise he practiced. He prayed for people *while* they conversed with him. Simple act. Incredibly tough to achieve, as I have found out in conversations with people since. At first, if I didn't get distracted and forget to pray altogether, I would find myself praying, "Lord, make this person change their mind, change the topic, or stop talking and pay attention to me."

But after awhile of praying for Jesus to change the person, shift their conversation, or otherwise "fix" them, another possibility emerges. Sometimes, with the eyes of the heart, one can sense the Spirit of Christ hovering over the converser, shadowing them, perhaps placing them in one's path to deliver a prophetic word of encouragement or warning or to be ministered to by a human soul.

Sometimes I find myself praying "Lord, *be with* this person. Permeate them, heal whatever pain and brokenness — visible or hidden to me — is oppressing them. Open my ears to hear You speaking behind their words. Open my heart to *be there* for them as You want me to be. Open my soul to be a conduit of Your presence to them. Lord, be with them."

An amazing thing, those words spoken in the liturgy, "The Lord be with you," and the response, "And with your spirit." Yes! The Lord truly be with you and take control of you, us, this worship, our mission, and the world.

Practicing the presence of the God Who is Really There is an eternal challenge in our distracted, dulled culture. Paradoxically, a toss-away line from liturgy — used by some as a prayer of last resort — can hold a truth and power that provokes and inspires. The Lord be with you!

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