

PEACE, PRAYER AND WISDOM

May the peace of God be with you, now and always. Once when a man who was with the prophet Muhammad finished his prayers the prophet said to him, “Go back and do your prayers again, you didn’t do them correctly.” After the man had done his prayers again the prophet repeated, “You didn’t pray correctly, do your prayers again.” He did them a second time, but still the prophet told him, “You haven’t done them correctly, do them again.” After the third time the prophet said once again, “You didn’t pray correctly.”

This time the man asked, “Tell me what I have to do to pray correctly.”

The prophet answered, “Stand and recite two verses from the Qur’an until you find peace in them, then bow until you find peace in your bow, put your head on the ground until you find peace there on the ground, then sit until you find peace in sitting.”

This is a traditional story handed down with a special purpose. We are meant to understand that the physical act, the outer ritual is not enough, what happens on the outside is not enough, something has to happen on the inside. How do we make something happen on the inside, how do we make this connection? When we pray we have to declare our intention, set our intention to have something happen inwardly, when we pray we should form the intention to make our connection to God. If we reach a state of peace our base desires are quiet; if they are quiet we can be in touch with our undifferentiated soul, with the peace connected to God.

We have to create situations which quiet our desires, devise situations which make peace for them, and when they are at peace we can be at peace with God, we can pray correctly, fulfill our intention correctly, we can communicate correctly with God.

How do we make peace for our desires? We think about the glory of God. Ibn‘Arabī called the world a translator for God. Sometimes when we look at things in the world we can be overwhelmed. Recently I was in California where they have a certain tree, the redwood, a type of cedar which grows to a hundred meters in height, fifteen meters in width, bigger than we can imagine, a tree which might live for three-and-a-half thousand years. When I stood in front of one of these trees, I realized I was standing in the presence of a living thing which had been on earth since the time of the Muhammad, since the time of Jesus, the time of Moses, I stood before the oldest living thing on the planet. The tree was taller than my imagination could conceive, wider than my imagination could project and older than my imagination could imagine; my imagination stopped working. My imagination was frozen because it saw the glory of God, the proof that what God creates is more than we can imagine, but this is merely His creation, what about God Himself?

We need to be in situations which are so persuasive our imagination goes to sleep and the wonder of God overwhelms us. When we are in this state we can find peace, the peace we should find with verses of scripture, the peace we should find when we prostrate in prayer, our head on the ground, the peace we should find when we sit in prayer. This is something demanding concentrated effort. There are things in our life which give us peace and things which take it away, we have choices to make. If we have

to choose between something which gives us peace and something which takes it away, we should choose the direction of peace, we should keep choosing it.

We think we have so many choices to make, different kinds of toothpaste, different kinds of cars, different kinds of jeans. All these things have their names written on them, choose me, choose me they say, making us think these choices are important. God has told us we have free will, He has told us we can choose what we want, but consider the history of your own life and you will realize there has always been only one choice—either we choose God or we choose the world, we have to make that same choice again and again. Every day we make the same choice, again and again it is the same choice, every year it is the same choice. God in His mercy, in His patience waits for each of us to make the right choice. Every time we make the wrong choice He is ready to forgive us, waiting for us to make the right choice. Do not despair, do not be sad, do not be depressed, the glory of God is His readiness to forgive, He is always ready to forgive no matter how often we make the wrong choice. He waits for us to make the right choice, this is His way.

When a baby does something wrong we explain what is right and forgive him, teach him what is right. God has sent us the teachings, He has sent us the prophets, He has told us what is right and what is wrong, what decisions to make, how to act in different situations. We have scripture and traditions, things given to teach us how to distinguish right from wrong. Understanding the difference between right and wrong is part of our life, and as we understand that difference, as our actions become appropriate, the magnetic pull of the world drawing us in the wrong direction has less power over us,

our conscience develops. Then when we find ourself in difficult situations we know automatically what to do, we know the right thing to do.

This is called wisdom, we need to become wise, wisdom is the door to peace. Understand that wisdom is the door to peace, to God. We have to work hard for wisdom, stay in the company of those we know have wisdom, listen to what they say, swallow those words until they become part of who we are. I have spent a large part of my life swallowing the words of a wise man, a wise teacher, words which now exist in my cells. My cells have swallowed so many words I merely repeat what I have learned: I am the son of a slave, a slave to God whom I want to be like. This is a difficult thing, but the only thing we have to do with our life. May that happen for each of us.