

Prayer of Transposition

Sr. Patricia M. McCormack, IHM, Ed.D.

www.ParentTeacherSupport.org

The Gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – gave us their experience of highlights in Jesus’ life. They wrote a story ABOUT Jesus – what he said, what he did, and what observers said and did. The accounts are written in the third person singular (he, she, or it) and in the third person plural (they or them). Consequently, the Gospel may “read” like a news report that more likely engages the mind more than the heart. If the words seem abstract and impersonal to a reader chances are that they will not have a lasting effect upon that person’s life.

Saint Augustine, a fourth century theologian and philosopher, developed a spirituality that transposed the Gospel verses from an objective story told about Jesus to (1) a story (conversation) told by Jesus to the reader or to (2) a story (conversation) told by the reader to Jesus. Switching the pronouns this way leads to a more intimate reading and, therefore, is more likely to engage the intuition and the feeling capacity of a person. The term that we use to refer to his style of prayer is “transposition.” Chester and Norrisey explained Augustine’s approach to Scripture in these words:

“In Augustinian Prayer, one uses creative imagination to transpose the words of Sacred Scripture to our situation today. One tries to imagine (intuit) what meaning the words of Scripture would have if Jesus Christ, or God the Father, or the Holy Spirit appeared and spoke them to us at this moment. In Augustinian Prayer we try to think of the words of the Bible as though they were a personal letter from God addressed to each one of us. Only secondarily are we concerned about the original, historical meaning of a text of Scripture; our primary concern during Augustinian Prayer is trying to discern what meaning these revealed words have for us today. Thus the Word of God becomes alive and applicable to our situation. . . . To catch the new insights applicable to ourselves in the words of Scripture the intuitive powers are especially needed.”

(Chester and Norrisey (1984). *Prayer and Temperament*, p. 58-59)

Let’s apply the technique of transposition to the Gospel story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman (Mark 7: 24-30). Following is the **original Gospel** – written in third person (he/him, she/he, they) – talking about Jesus. The third person pronouns or names appear in bold print:

From that place **he** went off to the territory of Tyre and Sidon. **He** retired to a certain house and wanted no one to recognize **him**; however, **he** could not escape notice. Soon **a woman**, whose small daughter had an unclean spirit, heard about **him**. **She** approached **him** and crouched at **his** feet. **The woman** who was Greek -- a Syro-Phoenician by birth -- began to beg **him** to expel the demon from **her** daughter. **He** told **her**: "Let the sons of the household satisfy themselves at table first. It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs. "Please, Lord," **she** replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the family's leavings." Then **he** said to **her**, " For such a reply, be off now! The demon has already left your daughter." When **she** got home, **she** found the child lying in bed and the demon gone. (Mark 7: 24-30)

Suppose we transpose the text – rearrange it – by changing the “person” of the pronouns. *Note: 1st person = “speaker” (I, we); 2nd person = “spoken to” (you); 3rd person = “spoken about” (he/him, she/her, they).* Observe how personal and possibly more intimate the scripture becomes once it is a dialogue-sharing between you and Jesus.

Let’s look at two separate styles – **Style A** where Jesus is talking to you, telling the story to you and **Style B** where you are telling the story to Jesus.

#1

Style A – Jesus Talking to Me

Rearrange the story to **let Jesus be the story-teller**. Consider Jesus in conversation with you. Change the Jesus references from “third person – he/him” to “first person – I.” Change references to yourself from “third person – she, her” to “second person – you.” Hear Jesus speaking directly to you.

From that place **I** went off to the territory of Tyre and Sidon and retired to a certain house wanting no one to recognize **me**; however, **I** could not escape notice. Soon **you** heard about **me**. **Your** small daughter had an unclean spirit. **You** approached **me** and crouched at **my** feet. **You** who were Greek -- a Syro-Phoenician by birth -- began to beg **me** to expel the demon from **your** daughter. **I** told **you**: "Let the sons of the household satisfy themselves at table first. It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs. "Please, Lord," **you** replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the family's leavings." Then **I** said to **you**, " For such a reply, be off now! The demon has already left **your** daughter." When **you** got home, **you** found your child lying in bed and the demon gone.

#2

Style B – Me Talking to Jesus

Rearrange the story so that **you are reminding Jesus of the incident**. Change the Jesus references from “third person – he/him” to “second person – you.” Change references to yourself from “third person – she, her” to “first person – I, me.” You become the storyteller.

From that place **you** went off to the territory of Tyre and Sidon and retired to a certain house wanting no one to recognize **you**; however, **you** could not escape notice. Soon **I** heard about **you**. My small daughter had an unclean spirit. **I** approached **you** and crouched at **your** feet. **I** who was Greek -- a Syro-Phoenician by birth -- began to beg **you** to expel the demon from **my** daughter. **You** told **me**: "Let the sons of the household satisfy themselves at table first. It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs. "Please, Lord,"

I replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the family's leavings." Then **you** said to **me**, " For such a reply, be off now! The demon has already left **your** daughter." When I got home, I found my child lying in bed and the demon gone.

Directions for an Exercise in Transposition Prayer

Choose Style A or Style B. (On another day pray with the other style.) Read the text slowly and thoughtfully. Pay attention to the feelings, desires, or attitudes that the text arouses within you. For instance, while some people feel resentment, others feel trepidation, and still others might feel self-righteous or some other feeling. Talk with Jesus about what you experience. Use "I-You" language. Speak directly to Jesus and with Jesus. For instance:

- **Ask clarifying questions of Jesus** like, "*What was it like for you to never have privacy, to never escape notice?*"
- **Make commentary to what you heard** like, "*I surprised myself when I came back at you and told you that even the dogs under the table eat the family food.*"
- **Draw a conclusion** like, "*It seems that not only were you not insulted by my boldness but that you actually respected me. Is that so?*"
- With the guidance of the Holy Spirit **deduce a life-lesson** or **make a resolution** to take into your day. For instance, "*I need to name and claim my need and then speak it to Jesus and others with respectful assertiveness.*"

OR

Pray through these kinds of questions:

1. In what ways am I like the Syro-Phoenician/Cananite woman?
2. Have I been waiting for someone else to feed my need? Do I need to take initiative? Am I willing to be persistent.
3. What part of me – my little one within – is in need of healing?