

Hosea 1:2-10
Psalm 85
Colossians 2:6-19
Luke 11:1-13

Proper 12C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
July 28, 2019
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Lord, Teach Us To Pray

I spend a lot of time with people who are in difficult places in their lives. Whether a relationship is ending or a terrifying diagnosis has been heard, whether the loss of physical capacity seems overwhelming or sudden financial insecurity sets in, my office is a place where all feelings are welcomed, a place where anything or everything can be said. My life as a Christian and my work as a pastor means I walk alongside people wherever they are on their journey, helping them to see God at work in their lives no matter what their circumstances and helping them to know themselves as God's own beloved. One of the questions I often ask in the midst of our conversations is "How's your prayer life?"

How is your prayer life? How do you pray? Do you set aside a time just to be with God in silence? Do you chatter in your mind throughout the day, "telling God" all the things you want God to know? Does God keep you company? Do you converse in the language of your heart? Do you say formal prayers?

How DO you pray?
How SHOULD you?

"Teach us to pray" the disciples said to Jesus. And it's interesting the way Jesus responded. He didn't say there is a right and wrong way to pray. He didn't suggest that your particular personality type might be best suited to lectio divina or labyrinth walking, or that for you singing might be the best way to pray. He didn't favor centering prayer over speaking in tongues, didn't recognize in any way that people are different and different prayer patterns are better suited to different people. Nothing about Jesus' response was about our individual, private need. His response was about our collective relationship with God and our relationships with each other. I think Jesus' very simple response to those disciples who so desperately wanted to learn to pray the right way says so much more than the words alone. I think the fact that Jesus just said "say this" means that there are some things that every single one of us needs to acknowledge every single day, regardless of "how" we pray. Do these few lines that are the Lord's prayer constitute the fullness of prayer? I don't think so, AND still, I believe these words are meant to be the foundation of all of our prayer lives.

We heard Luke's version of the Lord's prayer today. In Matthew's gospel Jesus is more explicit: *'When you are praying, Jesus said 'do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

*'Pray then in this way:
Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one...'¹*

This is not the sort of prayer that asks God to fulfill our needs, our friend's needs or the needs of the world, which is often how we spend our time praying. But each Sunday we open our worship praying Almighty God to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid. So, if God really does know everything we need before we ask, if God really does know every single thing in our hearts, why do we pray at all?

Some people pray for particular outcomes, like healing our bodies or bringing us the perfect partner or the perfect parking place, as though God is supposed to stop stroking his long grey beard, get up out of his heavenly rocking chair and pick up the car currently occupying the preferred parking place. But God doesn't have a grey beard and God doesn't work that way. Prayer is not a way to control or manipulate God or ourselves. Prayer is about communion. It serves to deepen our relationship with God, and to deepen our relationships with the ones we pray for. Prayer is about being with God, and that is an end unto itself.

Think about the relationships that matter most to you. They take time, yes? While we may feel the love of someone we don't often communicate with, we cannot be guided or sustained by that love or that relationship. Time in prayer – our time with God – nourishes our relationship with God just like spending time with our loved ones nourishes our human relationships. How would you feel if someone you love wouldn't talk with you or spend any time with you? How would you feel if your loved ones only spoke with you to ask you for things? How would you feel in a relationship where the other talks but doesn't ask about your concerns? How would you feel if the ones you loved only wanted to spend an hour on Sunday with you in a room full of other people?

In order for our relationship with God – our life in God – to deepen, we need to spend time alone with God. We don't need to be theologically astute, don't need the perfect, or even the "just right" words, don't need to be anyone or anything we are not. Quite the contrary. We need to come to God from precisely where we are in our lives, no matter how blessed or broken we feel.

¹ Mt 6:7-15

We cannot commune with God or anyone for that matter if we pretend to be someone we are not. I hope this comes as a relief to you! If your truth is “God, I don’t have time for you,” then pray that. If your truth is “God, I am so furious with you,” then pray that. If your truth is “thank you” or “I’m sorry” or “I am so sad” then pray that. Be available, present, willing. Be honest. We need to share our hopes and our heartaches, our fears and our joys in order to commune with God. And ultimately, we need to listen... to carve out quiet space, so we can hear the still small voice of God meant just for us.

Jesus said this and so much more when he taught us to pray, and everything he said was relational. We begin our prayer saying “Our.” Not dear, or my, but “Our.” We begin with “Our” because whether we’re gathered together on Sunday morning, or sitting in our prayer chair at home, we never pray alone. We are always praying with others which draws us out of our self-absorption, which is good for our souls. Praying “Our” reminds us that we are interdependent, that we belong to each other and that we are one in our God.

Jesus prayed to the Father. I imagine there are many ways he could have described the God of all creation, but he chose parent, one of the most intimate of all relationships. He chose relationship rather than construct. Mothers and fathers don’t exist absent a child. Parents give life to their children and God gives abundant, everlasting life to God’s children. When Jesus was in the garden at Gethsemane, he prayed to “Abba.” Do you know the term Abba? Is a lot like “Daddy” and conveys a sense of intimacy and deep connection.

Jesus prays to our Father in heaven. With so few words to his prayer instruction why include words to locate God in heaven? Where is heaven? In the sky? Here on earth? Jesus said the Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field², like a pearl of great price³, like a sower who went out to sow⁴, like a man who went on a journey⁵, like a king who gave a feast⁶. The kingdom of heaven is within YOU⁷, he said. Heaven isn’t so much a place as it is a way of being and heaven lives in each one of us, whether traveler or gardener or treasure hunter or king.

Our Father in Heaven... our God who lives in us. Your name is Holy, so holy that in ancient times your people would not even speak it. We are not so much that sort of holy these days, with “*OH MY GOD*,” peppering most every conversation I hear in public. But God’s name is holy and our prayer invites us to dwell in that holiness.

² Matthew 13:44

³ Matthew 13:45-46

⁴ Luke 8:5

⁵ Matthew 25:14

⁶ Matthew 22:1-2

⁷ Luke 17:21

Our Father in heaven, your name is holy, you are holy, you dwell in us and make us holy. Your kingdom come, your will be done here, in this heaven on earth. The kingdom of heaven Jesus said has come among us is a place of hospitality, where relationship rather than prominence or prestige matter. The kingdom of heaven is the welcome place for outcasts and sinners, the clean and unclean, Jews, Greeks, males, females, gay, straight, trans, black, brown, white, rich, poor, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, spiritualist, unbeliever... God's kingdom is the place where everyone is welcome because of who God is, not because of anything at all about who we are. God's kingdom will fully come on earth, when we have surrendered any need to think some worthy and others unworthy of the love God wants for everyone. This is a prayer for the grace to become active participants in blurring the lines between heaven and earth, to remember that "All the way to heaven, is heaven."⁸

Jesus teaches us to recognize our need for God. Feed us. Every one of us. Feed us with the bread that we need, just for today. If we took only what we need for today, trusting God to provide again tomorrow, the ones without bread might also be fed. Holding on to too much might be something we should ask God's forgiveness for. *Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors*, Jesus said, which is different from the language we use, even when we pray the "modern" version of the Lord's prayer. We say "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Or "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Jesus says *Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors*. As if it is all already accomplished. That is something very important to think about. Who haven't you forgiven? Perhaps when you pray the Lord's prayer this morning your words can be forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those, *except you-know-who*, who trespass against us...

And save us from temptation - the temptation to believe you are not there, that you do not love us, that we are not held in your love and your care. Save us from the temptation to believe we can save ourselves, because when we think we are the savior of our own universe, we are surely in the grips of the evil one.

It's so rich, isn't it, that prayer Jesus taught us to pray. What would it be like to offer the entirety of our lives in prayer? It is possible, you know. We can learn to talk and pray, to walk and pray, to choose your produce and pray. To pray without ceasing is to know that we are always walking in God's sight, always held in God's heart, consenting to God's desire for us. To pray "God, what do you want from me?" is very different from praying "God, what do you want for me?"

I have 41 books on prayer in my office. And while they are wonderful, they can only speak *about* prayer. When we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, we don't learn about God, we experience God as the love who desires to draw us near, not just to God's own self, but to each other. Amen.

⁸ Teresa of Avila