

A teacher of mine has a quote on his office door, that always stuck with me, “Prayer cannot be taught. It can only be learned by praying with those who do so often and well” (Aidan Kavanaugh)

You’d think the disciples would have had a front row seat to one who prayed often and well, but it seems that they weren’t always paying attention. The gospels tell us that Jesus took Peter, John and James to pray on a mountain, as he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became bright, and Moses and Elijah came and talked to Jesus (Luke 9:28-30). But as the scene shifts back over to the disciples, Luke observes, “Peter and his companions were very sleepy.” And in the Garden, on the night he was betrayed, Jesus withdrew about a stone’s throw away, knelt down and prayed. When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep!” (Lk 22:39ff).

And so, here in this passage in Luke, the disciples, and many of us, ask Jesus, “Teach us to pray.”

Or maybe we should back up a little bit and ask: What is prayer? At VBS, we talked about prayer with the young ones as talking to and listening for God. And we all know and remember the simple prayer posture with hands folded and eyes closed. But is that all there is to prayer? A few words, every so often? We still yearn to know how to pray.

So, Jesus, the kind and patient teacher, gives them a lesson, and teaches them what we know as the Lord’s Prayer. Now I know that whole sermon series have been preached on it, and countless books written on this very prayer, and I will not attempt to preach them all in this one sermon. But what I find interesting about this reading from Luke is that Jesus doesn’t just give them words to say, but tells a story to illustrate.

The story is about a man and his friend. In the middle of the night, the man is in need of bread to offer hospitality to a guest, and so goes to his friend and knocks on the door. But the friend inside is

not so receptive. He says, “Hey, it’s the middle of the night! I’m in bed! I’m not getting up to give you anything!” But apparently that answer does not satisfy the man, because he keeps on knocking, perhaps he wakes up all the neighbors too! And Jesus says, that though the friend may not get up to help simply because he is a friend, at least because this man is persistent, or in another translation “shameless,” the friend will get up and give him what he asks for.

The story reminds me of the joys of toddlers. I tell you I have not seen such persistence as from my dear 18 month old Gwendolyn. If she needs some juice, if she needs a diaper change, or just a hug, she repeats, “Mama, mama, mama, mama.” “Dada, dada, dada” Abba, father.

But for us grown-ups, prayer is occasional. We may say a prayer before bed or offer a blessing at table when we eat, we think of these as *moments* of prayer and are certainly not doing them all the time. But I think that prayer is much more than this! Paul Griffiths suggests, that we think, instead, of prayer as most fundamentally and centrally the acknowledgment of gift. “To treat what you have been given as a gift—to acknowledge as a gift and that it did not come from you, or that you made it for yourself, or that it you deserve it— then you have to be grateful, to say thank you ... and to keep on being grateful.”

Often we can do this with gifts people give us. I bet many of you can think of something special that you have been given, and that when you see it, you think of the person who gave it to you. A necklace, a book, a piece of family furniture. My stole and robe that I wear are gifts.

Our challenge is to be constantly grateful, always aware that whatever good things there are in us or in the world around us are not ours. Paul Griffiths calls this the *attitude of gratitude*.

Prayer is then, not only words, we say, but the whole orientation of our living. One of my friends at William and Mary told me how she would use her time walking between classes, along the beautiful brick paths praying with each step she took. And I know of groups of women in churches who have a prayer shawl ministry, who pray with each stitch. That is indeed moving us closer to persistence, to practicing prayer in all we do.

It this attitude of gratitude takes practice, it can't be simply occasional! It changes our outlook on life and we have to keep at it! We have to keep resisting the tug to focus on ourselves, and be drawn ever closer into living in the presence of God.

And when live this way it shapes who we are, and how we treat each other.

“Give us this day our daily bread”

“Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.”

Note the language of “us” and “our” and “ourselves.” There is no “I” or “me” in Jesus’ prayer. Because if we truly recognize God’s grace among us, we also recognize that God’s grace is for everyone!

And so, the prayer Jesus gave us is not *private* prayer, just for me - it is the prayer of the community, the church. We are called to be the Body of Christ. We are called to be light, to be salt, to be leaven for the world. We are called to be bread for the world. We are called to live and breathe in radical dependence on, utterly trusting in, the God who made us, and listens to our prayers, and calls us by name, the God who forms us into a community that prays together, "Give us this day our daily bread." Not just me, but all of us.

Of course, this is easier said than done. We are more likely to depend on our learning or our ability to figure things out for ourselves. There is a wonderful story about Mother Teresa and a famous ethicist who came to work at her house of the dying in Calcutta, at a time when he was seeking a clear answer to how best to spend the rest of his life. She asked him what she could do for him, and he asked her to pray for him. She said, “What do you want me to pray for?” And he said, “Pray that I have clarity.” She replied, “No, I will not do that – clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.” The ethicist observed that Mother Teresa always seemed to have the clarity he longed for, but she laughed and said, “I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.”

Mother Teresa prayed that he would be transformed. Trust, like gratitude, reorients our lives, changes our attitude and outlook, and it must be practiced. Again, we have to keep resisting the tug to focus on ourselves – trust in ourselves, and be drawn ever closer into living in the presence of God – trusting God and rejoicing in the many gifts God has given us.

But what if God is, like the friend at midnight, asleep? I am sure many of you can think of times when it seems that God is not listening or answering.

In his reflection on this passage of scripture Frederick Buechner writes, “[The] point seems to be that the secret of prayer is persistence. Keep at it, keep speaking into the darkness, and if nothing comes, speak again and then again. And finally the answer is given. It may not be the answer that we want – the kind of stopgap peace, the kind of easy security, the kind of end to loneliness that we are apt to pray for. Christ never promises peace in the sense of no more struggle and suffering. Instead, he helps us to struggle and suffer as he did, in love, for one another. Christ does not give us security in the sense of something of this world...Instead, the answer that he gives, I think, is himself.”

We can trust God! Not because God gives us what we *want*, but because God in Jesus Christ has given us God’s very self!!

Pastor John Thomas told a story about a friend of his who had spent some time teaching children to swim. The friend told him that the hardest part of this work was getting the kids not to fight the water, but to relax and let the buoyancy of the water hold them up. He said that it's the same way with the sovereignty of God. If only we could let go of our leaning forward, our tensing up, and our struggling...if only we could let ourselves fall gently into the sovereignty of God, and let it carry us and hold us up.

God will hold us up! Perhaps you notice that we often will use the word, *sustainer*, for God, and specifically for God the Holy Spirit. At the end of this passage Jesus notes that even we sinful people give our children good gifts, and so how much more does God surely give the Holy Spirit, the

gift of God's abiding and sustaining presence with us. (Romans 8:5, When we cry "Abba, Father", it is that very Spirit being witness with our spirit that we are children of God. Rom 8:26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness for we do not know to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.)

Living a life of true deep prayer is to continually and persistently reorient ourselves to God, and to acknowledge the gifts of God always around us. It doesn't come without practice. And we are able to practice and to learn best when we are surrounded by God's holy community – the church.

The Holy Spirit, will lead us on the way of compassion, and to transformation, not just as individuals but as a community. Because this prayer is the prayer of our community and not just a private one, it reminds us, challenges us, urges and inspires us as a community not only to form this prayer with our lips but to be formed ourselves by this prayer, shaped into a community of compassion and justice that makes sure that all of God's children have "their daily bread" and, all that they need from the abundance with which God has blessed us. The prayer calls us to join in the building of God's kingdom not up in heaven, but here, on earth, a reign of justice, healing, mercy, and love. All glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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