

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

Luke 11:1-13

“*Lord, teach us to pray,*” Jesus’ disciples requested of him. Jesus had just been praying by himself as we often witness him doing in the Gospels. When he finished, the disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, just like John the Baptist taught his disciples how to pray. Presumably John the Baptist, who was an Essene (something like the early monastics who went off into the desert) taught his disciples certain times, methods and formulas for their regular daily prayers. The disciples wanted Jesus to give them something like that, something they could grasp on to, something they could practice and teach to other new converts.

It wasn’t as if the disciples were unfamiliar with prayer. As all Jewish men they prayed three times a day, in the early morning, at evening and at mid-day. They’d have probably prayed something like the *Shemoneh Esreh*, the Eighteen Benedictions, which would include:

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is one.

Blessed are you, Lord...: - “shield of Abraham,” “who makes the dead alive,” “who delights in repentance,” “rich in forgiveness,” “who humbles the insolent,” “who builds Jerusalem,” “who hears prayer.” (The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, p. 617)

They thanked God at meal-time. They prayed each week in the Synagogue. They prayed the Psalter. They prayed on the Sabbath and on special feast days.

And yet when they observed Jesus at prayer – going off by himself in the early morning and sometimes talking to God all night long... When they witnessed the amazing closeness Jesus had with God his Father... When they observed the strength and power that flowed from his prayers... When they saw Jesus at prayer they wanted to experience something deeper. They wanted him to teach them to pray like he did.

All of us know how to pray. We certainly know the two basic prayers that Anne Lamott describes as the staple of her prayer life. “*Help me, help me, help me!*” and “*Thank you, thank you, thank you.*” And we can apply those two variations in intercessory prayer for others. We pray quite extensively and beautifully in the words of our worship. We pray the psalms. We pray as we sing the beautiful hymns in our hymnal. We give God thanks at meals. Many of you say special prayers in the morning or at bed time. At St. John’s prayer is an essential part of all our meetings.

One of the prayers we pray is the one that Jesus taught his disciples in today’s Gospel – the Lord’s Prayer. I am always amazed that for people who are deathly ill or who’ve had a stroke or suffer from dementia, the *Lord’s Prayer* is the one prayer they can still recite.

We know how to pray and yet which of us thinks that we are experts in praying? Which of us think we know enough about prayer? At our very best are apprentices in prayer. We are in the same position of the disciples and can benefit like they did with their same request, *Lord, teach us to pray.*

And so Jesus did. “*When you pray,*” he taught, say “*Father.*” The first thing Jesus teaches us is that prayer is personal, relational. We don’t pray to a concept: *infinite source of all that is.* No; we pray to a personal being. We pray to *our Father.* Jesus teaches us that our relationship with God is as close and personal as it is with our blood relations. A father would be the head of a household. God, *our Father,* is the head of our spiritual household. We didn’t create the relationship. We are his children.

“*Hallowed be your name.*” God’s name is holy – God is holy. And you know what? We’re not! God is other, apart, separate, holy in a way that we are not. In Hebrew scriptures God’s actual name is too holy and sacred to even be pronounced. One would say, instead, “*the Lord.*” The basic sin of Adam and Eve – the sin that is common to every human creature – is the desire to presume to be like God. Jesus invites us to dare to call God *Father,* but he reminds us at the same time that God is also beyond us. God is *holy.* God is like a refining fire. God’s holiness is to be respected and honored.

Many of our traditions remind us to respect God – the reverence with which we treat his house and especially the sanctuary, bowing, crossing ourselves, kneeling in his presence, standing in awe and wonder, hearing his Word as sacred – all these remind us that God’s name is holy.

Your Kingdom come. Jesus invites us to acknowledge that God rules. God has a plan, a purpose, a *Kingdom,* that is in process. That *Kingdom* is not fully realized; it is never to be equated on equal terms with the kingdoms of this world. God’s rule is not necessarily in competition with the kingdoms of this world, with the Federal government or Microsoft or Apple or other corporations or governments. God’s rule is always subverting them. For as Jesus said to Pontus Pilate, “*my Kingdom is not of this world.*” (John 18:36) God’s Kingdom is in this world; it’s now and not yet.

Jesus demonstrates by word and example the way God’s rule is exercised. The cross is the focus. This is not a kingdom imposed on anyone else. “*It is a Kingdom that comes into being as we willingly obey and imaginatively pray our participation in the rule.... The sovereignty of our Father patiently, mercifully waits for worshiping obedience.*” (Eugene Peterson, *Tell it Slant,* p. 177) *Thy Kingdom come.*

Give us each day our daily bread. After acknowledging God the prayer Jesus teaches us quickly moves to human petition. The first one is basic, *give us each day our daily bread.* We have needs. We are needy people. We ask God’s help to provide our daily necessities. Jesus’ prayer acknowledges our ultimate dependency on God.

The truth is that we would rather deny our neediness. “*Consumerism is a narcotic that dulls the awareness that we are in need. By buying what we need, we assume control of*

our lives...” “Technology is a narcotic. It depersonalizes needs to something that can be handled by a machine or a device. We replace a sense of need by the satisfaction of being in control.” “Money and machines anaesthetize neediness. They put us in charge, in control.” (op. cit. Peterson, p. 183) Jesus reminds us of our basic dependency on God, to acknowledge the source of everything that we are blessed to have. Acknowledging and standing in that dependent relationship is the true posture and attitude of prayer. Give us each day our daily bread.

“Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” In teaching us to pray Jesus reminds us that we come before God with dirty hands and dirty hearts. Only God can wash us clean and forgive us. Jesus also reminds us that the basic act of forgiving others is integrally linked with our forgiveness. It’s not a quid pro quo. We forgive because we ourselves have been forgiven. And yet our willingness to forgive others helps the gift of forgiveness flow more freely in us. We are forgiven sinners. That acknowledgement is basic to our faithful prayer and faithful practice.

“And do not bring us to the time of trial.” The other petitions in the Lord’s Prayer come out of the present. This last petition in Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer acknowledges the threats we may face in the future. The phrasing here in Luke is somewhat different than what we’re used to reciting in the Lord’s Prayer, when we say *“lead us not into temptation.”* As God acknowledged to Cain in Genesis 4:6-7, when he was angry enough to murder his brother Abel, *sin is lurking* like a wild beast *at the door*. Its desire is to overcome you. We need God’s help in that battle.

Jesus continued his teaching on prayer illustrating with parables two other important attitudes to bring to God in prayer. First of all he emphasized persistence. If you can shame a friend who is too lazy to get out of bed to help you at 4:00 a.m. in the morning simply by banging on his door until he finally gets up to help you, how much more effective will your persistence be with God your Father who made you and loves you?

The last attitude Jesus includes in this teaching on prayer is expectation. We expect good things from our loved ones. We should expect good things from God. We should persist in asking him for those good things that fit with his Kingdom and will for us and we should expect him to give them to us. If human parents know how to give good gifts to their children how much more our loving Father in heaven?

The Lord’s Prayer is not only a wonderful prayer to pray; it also represents Jesus’ teaching on prayer. He teaches us that prayer is personal; we relate to God as a person. We also relate to God as holy, transcendent. Through prayer we orient ourselves and our desires for God’s Kingdom to come, God’s will to be done. Jesus teaches us a total lack of pretension. He teaches us to pray simply, honestly and straightforwardly. There’s no special titles for God, no wheedling, no pleading. Jesus invites us to be ourselves before God, to come to him as we are as fully human, needy people and as forgiven sinners seeking to do God’s will.

Lord teach us to pray. I invite you to pray with me the prayer he taught us – the shorter and more concise Lucan version of that prayer as we find it beginning with the last word of the third line of today’s Gospel reading:

Father, hallowed be your name. Your Kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial. Amen.