

Teach Us to Pray

Luke 11:1-13

"Lord, teach us to pray," say the disciples to Jesus. The Westminster affirmation defines as the proper goal of humankind: you are doing what you ought to do, as a human being, only when your whole being is focused on God, and this means—when you forget yourself!

We can become burdened about prayer and the techniques concerning "right" prayer. But few of actually *pray* very often, or, if we do sometimes pray, we tend to judge our efforts as insufficient. Our spontaneous, sometimes desperate cries for help seem—pathetically lacking in praise, thanksgiving, intercession, and the other components requisite to truly *God-centered* prayer.

That is why the prayer Jesus taught his disciples is so wonderfully refreshing, and perhaps why over the centuries it has remained the one prayer that even lapsed Christians remember. It does not require of us that we become anything we are not already. It is a deeply *human* kind of prayer. It is a prayer for human beings, that is, for creatures *in need*.

This prayer that Jesus gave us as an example begins with the "glorification" of God: it acknowledges that God is "in heaven," and that God is holy and even God's name is to be honored. The pray acknowledges that God has sovereignty over heaven and the earth and the spiritual reign all belong to God. God is the One who is also "our Father!"

This is in keeping with the biblical conception of God from beginning to end. The Judeo-Christian picture of God is of One who is *with us*, just as we humans are never separable from God - it is about God-in-relationship-with-us.

After this briefest of salutation, the prayer moves to the human conditions - "Give us... . Forgive us... . Lead us... . Deliver us." Pious convention has conditioned most of us to repeat this prayer so quietly and reverentially that we fail to recognize how aggress we sound when compared to how we have been taught proper manners. There is no "Please," none of the

softening, pious interjections that often mark—"Oh dear Father," "blessed Lord," "sweet Jesus," and so on—just "Give us, forgive us, lead us, deliver us"!

The whole assumption of this prayer is that it is uttered out of a condition of real *necessity*. The one who prays here is driven by great need—there is no time for pretence. The object of this prayer, is not so much to lose ourselves in the contemplation of who God is as to find ourselves—to become ourselves.

We are (1) dependent—therefore "Give us"; we are (2) guilty—therefore "Forgive us"; we are (3) lost and vulnerable—therefore "Lead us," "Deliver us." Because the One to whom we pray is not ordinarily "glorious" (like the gods we create in our own image!) but glorious in loving, we are able sometimes through our most honest acts of prayer to find that our very weakness is the occasion for encounter with the Source of new strength.

The verses following Jesus' model prayer (vv. 5-13) serve only to reinforce the point the prayer itself has made: prayer is not a meek, contrived, and merely "religious" act; it is the act of human beings who know how hard it is to be human. (**Douglas John Hall**)

"Lord, teach us to pray," say the disciples to Jesus. After offering the disciples a template for prayer Jesus begins with a story. Jesus began his instruction by acknowledging the facts that our prayers are not always met. The lesson is straightforward: sometimes human persistence in prayer is where we must begin. He told of the person who goes to a friend at midnight, a friend who is initially unresponsive, suggesting by analogy that sometimes only *because* of human persistence will God eventually come down and answer the door on which we have been knocking. Prayer, says Jesus in so many words, arouses God!

What immediately follows Jesus' first lesson in prayer is the command to pray: "Ask ... search ... knock." When the only word possible for one in extreme stress is "Help!" then we need to direct that toward God in prayer. But prayer can also be a sigh too deep for words, or human anguish or fear or longing or gratitude entering language. God is that friend for those who enter into this holy conversation. In God we know to whom we are talking when we bow our heads and close our eyes. In God we have been addressed and included in the conversation for which we were made.

Each instruction Jesus gives the disciples invites them to enter into a relationship. That relationship involves a conversation, and the conversation begins with a word. God has first spoken the one Word to us in Jesus Christ; now we need only muster the good sense to speak back. If by God's grace we do, we will find ourselves (literally) in conversation with a friend who knows our every weakness because he himself has cried out in anguish and been met with silence. How else but in conversation with God, through the words of Scripture and the witness of the church, could we trust that God is a God who will come after us when we are lost, dine with us when we are cast out by all others, welcome us home after we have wasted our lives, and who will keep us from falling too far? How else but as God's Spirit (ours for the asking) intercedes between these words that bear witness to God and our solitary, short lives without him, how else will we find ourselves accompanied along the way?

If God is in some deep and eternal sense like Jesus, we can talk: through thick or thin, come hell or high water, no holds barred, because nothing—neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor any other creature—will be able to silence the Word that answers our prayers in his flesh.

(Cynthia A. Jarvis)

So, when Jesus responded to the request of his followers that he teach them how to pray, what he taught them became important—and has remained important—for the life of the church. He gave them—and us—words to address God, words to praise God, and, only then, words to petition God.

Today's Gospel invites us to reflect on the story of our prayer life and where it has taken us. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who put us on the path to prayer as an essential part of our life. So we continue to ask, Lord, teach us to pray. Teach us truly to pray the words given by your Son, calling on God as our parent and protector. We can take comfort from the fact that, even when we do not know how to pray as we ought, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness with sighs too deep for words (Rom. 8:26-27). For our part, we continue to teach those entrusted to us to pray as Jesus taught us, confident that our prayer will find favor with our God. **(James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R.)** Real prayer cannot be faked. Its only prerequisites

7/28/13

Luke 11:1-13

TEACH US TO PRAY

are sufficient self-knowledge to recognize the depths of our need, and enough humility to ask for help. "Ask! Really ask! Keep on asking! And it will be given you"—*and is being given you already in the asking!* (**Douglas John Hall**)

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).