

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Sunday July 28, 2019 Proper 12C  
Text Luke 11: 1-13  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren  
Theme: Learning to Pray Jesus' Prayer.

"Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples," (Luke 11).

Jesus usually teaches his disciples without their asking. With prayer, it's different. In this case, the disciples know that they don't know how to pray, at least they don't know how to pray in the spirit of Jesus, so they ask for instruction in prayer. I wonder have we ever asked Jesus for instruction in prayer. Have we ever apprenticed ourselves to the Prayer of Jesus in order to learn how to pray?

In one of his books, Frederick Buechner says something like, "everybody prays, even when they don't know they are praying." That delighted "Ahh..." when you see fireworks light up a night sky, that desperate "Why me?" that you ask when something bad happens to you, that's prayer, says Buechner.

But Jesus's disciples say they don't know how to pray and they ask Jesus to teach them the skill of prayer. And I think that this resonates with us as well. We don't always feel like we know how to pray even though prayer is really about having a lively relationship with the living God. So often we are intimidated, make it too hard, feel insecure, assign ourselves to failing before we even try.

Jesus did not make his disciples feel inadequate or stupid. He gave them a model prayer, a prayer that we pray here every Sunday, the so-called "Lord's Prayer."

"When you pray, pray like this," Jesus says.

Prayer, Christian prayer, prayer "in Jesus's name," doesn't come naturally. We must be taught by Jesus, guided. Luke records Jesus's instruction in a more concise way than Matthew:

"Father, hallowed be your name." – Father uphold the holiness of your name.

"Your kingdom come." – Bring in your kingdom not our kingdom.

“Give us each day our daily bread.” – Give us the bread we need for today.

“And forgive us our sins.” - Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you.

“For we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” – Just as we forgive those who have wronged us.

“And do not bring us to the time of trial.” – And don’t lead us into temptation.

Jesus gives his disciples, gives us words to say. They are not words full of a great deal of solemnity. They are intimate words, familiar and immediate. We are to address God as if they were a parent Daddy or Mommy. It reminds us of something St. Augustine said, that “God is more intimate to me than I am to myself” and of St. Teresa of Avila, “that God resides in the very center of the human person.”

Jesus’ prayer does not begin with human need. It does not begin by asking something of God but rather connects us to the being of God, hallowing God’s name and enlisting us in the work or activity of God’s kingdom, helping us to desire that God’s ways become evident in daily life.

We are allowed to pray for bread, but only enough for the day, not for extra that we can squirrel away or invest for another time. Jesus’ prayer is a modest prayer, a humble prayer and in ways it grates against our own proclivities. More is good, bigger is better. What is wrong with extra?

To put it another way, praying for daily bread slows us down, opens us to reflecting on those that might not have enough bread for the day, this is surely not the desire of God. We dare not pray for daily bread if we are not willing to live and work and serve in such a way that others have what they need daily as well.

If we long for God’s kingdom to come then the prayer woos us into the activity of the kingdom, the challenging work of forgiving those who have wronged us. Letting go of the toxic ways of resentment, bitterness and hatred to allow the life of the Spirit within. Part of hallowing God’s name is to forgive as we long to be forgiven by God, to forgive in the ways that we know deep down we need to be forgiven. Jesus’ prayer is not about pretending to be holier than thou or denying our own human failings. Jesus prayer is about becoming a real human being and living a believable life.

The Prayer of Jesus is about bringing about a new reality, a new kind of person who is humble and connected to God in a way that is inviting and attractive, curious and compelling. The prayer of Jesus intends to make of you and me a God-Human connection going about our daily lives. The prayer of Jesus sows a seed of beauty within the life of a person and its goal is to become a beautiful tree that attracts all the birds of the air into its branches. The life of forgiveness is beautiful. The way of Christian simplicity of being ok with enough is deeply attractive to our striving overstuffed world.

The prayer of Jesus invites us into a new way of life that becomes itself a tree of life for others, a place of rest and shelter, a place of shade and beauty, a place of change and growth.

We dare not pray the prayer of Jesus if we do not wish to be changed into his likeness. We dare not pay attention to the words of the prayer if we do not want to become reflective, convicted, and open to the ways of the kingdom.

Better to memorize this prayer and say it quickly without thinking.  
Better to pray this prayer automatically and never consider what the prayer intends.  
Better to stuff this beautiful prayer into your liturgical satchel and never give it another thought.

Of course, that is the danger, to pray automatically without any intention. To pray the Prayer of Jesus in a way that cannot change us, in a way that cannot get inside of us and cannot begin to do its dangerous work.

The mystical traditions are especially sensitive to this problem of saying established prayer without corresponding interiority. In one of Leo Tolstoy's mystical short stories the contrast between genuine spiritual expression and inherited prayers is illuminated.

"A bishop, traveling by ship, is told that three hermits are living on a nearby island. He concludes that they are within his jurisdiction and it is his duty to inspect their orthodoxy. He persuades the captain of the ship to change course and put him ashore on the island.

He finds the hermits and asks them if they are Christian. They whole-heartedly respond, "Yes!" He inquires how they pray and they tell him, "When we pray, we say 'We are three. You are three. Have mercy on us.'" This unauthorized and perhaps heretical prayer horrifies the bishop. He quickly instructs them in the Lord's Prayer,

which he believes is the only proper way to prayer is one is Christian. After all, if it was good enough for Jesus... The hermits do their best to learn the prayer, but they are not quick studies and struggle. Finally, the bishop returns to the ship, satisfied that he has done his duty and their bishop and father in God.

On another trip of the bishop, the ship is sailing past the island of the three hermits. Looking at the island, the bishop remembers with pleasure his pastoral efforts at instructing the hermits in the Lord's Prayer. Later that evening, while strolling on deck, the bishop sees a ball of light come out of the island and move toward the ship. As the ball of light gets closer to the ship, the bishop sees the three hermits are within it. They speak to him from within the sphere of light and tell the bishop they have forgotten some of the Lord's Prayer. They need the bishop to reinstruct them. The bishop is jolted into a new level of awareness and awakened to the holiness of the hermits; a holiness more profound than the correct recitation of the Lord's Prayer. The humbled bishop merely says, "Go home and when you pray, say 'You are three, we are three. Have mercy on us.' [Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart: Parables of the Spiritual Path from Around the World.]

Genuine spiritual illumination is played off against the rote memorization of an inherited prayer, even the central prayer of the Christian tradition. The hermits have found their own way of praying and it is not inferior to the Lord's Prayer, in fact it works powerfully. Conventional religiosity is not a substitute for a fuller experience of prayer. **Prayer is not the words that we say, but the inner being of the human being in communion with God.**

I'm not saying that you or I should abandon the inherited prayer of Jesus because it can be said automatically. Rather **the point of Jesus teaching his friends and us how to pray is to learn how to mindfully inhabit the structured words of the prayer of Jesus in such a way that our own consciousness is shifted to become more and more like the consciousness of Jesus.**

The Prayer of Jesus, either Luke's shorter version or Matthew's version that you know by heart already has a purpose in your life. It is meant to awaken you to a something fresh about God. It is inviting you into an interior journey, a savoring of meanings, a lingering over God's loving ways until they become your ways, until their atmosphere is the weather of your interior.

You may want to consider using both versions of Jesus' Prayer in your daily life. The faithful in other traditions are encouraged to pray five times each day. I wonder what it would mean for devout Christians to join in these rounds of prayer with a

simple but thoughtful alternating of Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer and Matthew's more familiar one? We usually say the Lord's prayer loud and fast in public which allows almost no time for meditative work. What if you began to say it slowly, in a masticating manner, like a cow chewing its cud? What if you allow God to pour the self-giving generative love of God into the cup of your heart? If you dare, your cup might just runneth over. (Psalm 23).

Prayer is best thought of as conversation with God. In any good conversation, there is speaking, yes. And there is also listening. Even with our very best friends, there are things we can talk about and things we don't need to talk about. Jesus helps us, even encourages us, to be in daily conversation with God. That conversation is called prayer in Jesus's name.

So, give thanks that Jesus tells us—at least that's what is implied in the parable of the friend at midnight—go ahead and ask. Knock and the door will be opened. If your good friends don't deny your urgent requests, how much more so will God not deny you? It is successful because it is our acts of asking, seeking and knocking that open us up to receive what God is only too ready to give, the gift of the Spirit's presence in our lives connecting us to the source of all life.

Thus, we pray as Jesus taught us:

*“Our Father, who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy Name,  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done,  
On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us of our trespasses,  
As we forgive those  
Who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
And the power, and the glory,  
For ever and ever. Amen.”*