

TEACH US HOW TO PRAY

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 85; Luke 11: 1-13

I think most people are not quite sure what prayer is all about. Some, who are practiced at religion, have it down pat. The nuns and priests of the cloister who pray the rosary have beads and count the octaves of prayers, and know the *Hail Mary's* to say and in what order - the rote business of offering prayers you don't even have to recall they are so familiar, they just trip off their tongue.

Episcopalians may not necessarily know how to pray any better than we do, but they have that glorious Book of Common Prayer, Thomas Cranmer's words largely; revised and updated somewhat these days, but lovely lilting prayers they are.

O thou, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid, cleanse we pray thee the thoughts of our hearts... prayers like that.

We have our own prayers in worship, the Prayers of the People we call it, we Presbyterians, and the prayers are meant to express what are the heartfelt yearnings and longings of the people in the pew. They are extemporaneous, or at least original to the pastor who prays for and on behalf of us all. And since it's a pastor that prays, we all pray as much his or her prayer as our own. The hope of the minister is that some of the longings and needs and thanksgivings and intercessions that are offered are the prayers we all might offer if we were the ones praying, which indirectly we are.

We teach our children to pray. *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.* Wikipedia says that that is an 18th Century prayer which was first published in the *New England Primer*. And even so, it is a rather dark prayer for a young child if you think about the words, all this talk of taking my soul if I should die before I wake. Fodder for the nightmares of an eight year old if you ask me.

All day long around the world people offer prayers. I do, when I am visiting with people, I pray *with* them, and pray *for* them, and promise my *continuing* prayers. I pray at night. I pray in the morning. I pray before I start writing a sermon. I pray on the subway sometimes for the souls I see there. I pray before coming into the worship service each Sunday - the pastors pray together. And often I forget to pray when I ought to pray as well, and I know that all my prayers are inadequate, the babbling of an inarticulate man fumbling with words that are less than the parlance of heaven.

Maybe like you, I often wonder what it really is that I am doing in prayer. I know that I am speaking to God, but God is such a hard reality to consider, so much bigger than my ability to comprehend. So much bigger than any grandfather I never knew, with a long beard and a stern face. So much more personal than an all permeating gas in the universe that is formless and void. More intimate and real than the Spirit that moved

across the waters at the time of the Creation. And yet elusive, distant and ethereal, and also closer than the breath in my lungs, and more near than the blood in my veins.

John Calvin said that prayer “is an intimate conversation of the pious with God.”¹ And he added that it is the “chief exercise of faith.” While the word pious probably puts us off, it is John Calvin’s way of speaking about the reverence and naiveté that one must bring to prayer.

How is it St. Paul describes our predicament to the Romans? “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.”²

Maybe the disciples sensed something of their own inadequacy when they asked Jesus, who seemed to know how to pray, if he would teach them how to do so. Matthew tells this same story as a part of the Sermon on the Mount. But Luke disconnects it and ties it to a parable about a man who goes to his neighbor at midnight and begs for bread to feed some late arriving houseguests.

The neighbor gives him the bread, not so much for the sake of the friendship of the two of them so much as for the persistence of the petitioner. The moral of the parable might well be, *make enough of a pest of yourself and maybe God will grant your prayer.*

For me the essence of Jesus’ model for prayer is the opening phrase, Jesus’ reference to God. *Father...* he says.

Abba, in Aramaic, an intimate name, more like *Daddy* than *Father*. It is a word indicating closeness, history, affection. And it’s that that I find so disarming. Would that we all could feel that sense of intimacy with God that we could offer our prayers with the confidence that we knew what we were doing, and we knew that our prayers were heard sympathetically.

Jesus doesn’t seem to have that problem, wondering whether what he is saying is working or not, whether his words and thoughts are heard by God, whether what he is praying is the right thing or not. But then, of course, he’s Jesus and we are not. Which is why *he* can pray with such confidence, and *we* struggle and stammer and cannot find the words to pray a decent prayer to save our life. Lord, teach us how to pray.

In one episode of the Golden Girls, Rose has had a heart attack and Blanche, Dorothy, and Sophia are in the waiting room of the hospital pacing and worried. Blanche decides she needs to pray for Rose. “God, you remember me,” Blanche says, “it’s been a long time since we talked.” Blanche then thanks God for blessing her with all the beautiful attributes that men find so appealing in her, until Dorothy reminds her to think about Rose. So Blanche intercedes for Rose and promises if God will get Rose through this crisis, she will not sleep with any more men unless they *really, really* need it. The prayer finishes and a handsome doctor comes out to report that Rose is recovering well.

He is instantly smitten with Blanche. As Dorothy and Sophia leave the waiting room and go to see Rose, the doctor asks Blanche if she might like to have dinner some evening. And while Blanche wants to accept, she is mindful of the prayer that she has

just prayed, and the deal that she has just made with God. So Blanche asks if the doctor *really, really* needs to go out with her. And the doctor says, not *really*. So Blanche is forced to decline his invitation. She then looks upward in God's direction and says, "Oh you are a vengeful God."

The scene is funny because it is expressive of the complicated relationship that all of us have with God and with prayer. We are not quite sure of the language of the thing, what our relationship with God is, on what close terms we are, how honest to be, as if God did not already know more about us than we know, whether we can bargain with God or not, and how to express what it is that we need to say.

Jesus' prayer, offered in response to his disciples request for instruction, is the key to understanding what we need to know about prayer. God is *Abba*, father, mother, parent to us all; the parent who took us in her arms when we were crying, kissed us on our forehead when we laid down to sleep at night, held our hand crossing the street, suckled us at her breast when we were hungry, lifted us on his shoulders so that we could see above the crowd. God is *Abba*, the one who knows us through and through and loves us still and all.

We could walk our way through the phrases of the Lord's Prayer, and many a preacher has, with a sermon of seven Sundays in a row, or five depending on whether she is using the Matthean prayer or the Lukan version. But the point is that the prayer is praise, and thanksgiving, and intercession. Which is to say that the words are a pattern for prayer in which prayer itself is modeled as the intimate expression of the heart's desire and the soul's yearning, honest conversation between old friends, openness with one another in which nothing is or can be hidden.

We all know that not all our prayers are answered in the way we want, nor do we receive all the things we ask in prayer. Which is not to say that prayer is not heard, but only that not all we ask is ready for us to receive, or timely, or most importantly what God intends. And God's intentions trump our own at all times, which is not the easiest truth to swallow, but it is the whole truth nonetheless.

There is nothing that we cannot say in prayer. We can rail against God, and decry God's injustice, and God will not go away. God is there for us to beat about the head and shoulders, to punch when hitting something is all that we have left to do. And God will take it, like a parent who knows full well the measure of a broken heart.

And God is ready to listen at all times. Like the all night diner - there when you're rolling in at 2:00 a.m., making no judgments about how you look or where you've been. It's all right, God's just glad to see you back again and in one piece.

Some years ago I was in Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, that beautiful Gothic church on Nob Hill which towers above the city around it. It is a glorious church. As I entered the sanctuary, the organist was rehearsing as a handful of tourists milled about and sat in the pews to take in the music and the feel of the place, and a few prayed.

The organist was perfecting sections of the Charles Widor's Toccata from Symphony No. 5, which Bill plays from time to time and especially at Easter. All about the church hanging from the crossbeams and on the sides were panels of the AIDS quilt reminding us that we were surrounded in this holy place by a great cloud of witnesses who had prayed earnest prayers.

I sat in the sanctuary and soaked in the music. And eventually I worked my way forward to the high altar, looked in the choir, and came to the side by the lectern where there was a free standing board that had small 3x5 cards tacked onto it. These were prayer requests left by people who were asking the priests to say prayers for those for whom they had special concerns.

Since no one was watching, I read some of the petitions that were written on the cards. "Please pray for our son. He's been missing for three days and we're afraid he's living on the street and doing drugs again."

Another petition said, "I'm pregnant and my boyfriend doesn't want us to have this baby. I'm going for an abortion on Wednesday and I hope God will forgive me."

Another clearly written in the smudges and scrawl of a homeless person, asked the priests to pray that people give him some food today. "I haven't eaten in three days, except out of the trash bin," he wrote.

And one other prayer maybe summed up all of them, "Pray for me, if you think it will do any good. I've tried everything else and failed."

As I stood there reading those cards, I felt uneasy as if I were eavesdropping on a conversation that I was not meant to hear, and of course I wasn't supposed to hear it. Prayer is the "intimate conversation of the pious with God" John Calvin said.

Except of course, the *pious* in this case were not particularly religious types, but rather the great unwashed of the city of San Francisco, people who had made their way in from the street and who had not themselves offered a prayer, necessarily, but who asked that the priests might pray on their behalf, a prayer that was sometimes a cry for help, sometimes an offering of thanksgiving, sometimes an appeal for counsel, sometimes the request for a miracle... the intimate conversation of the pious with God.

We have become a church and a people that are not as good as we once were with the language of prayer. We don't know how to pray as we ought. We are not sure to whom it is that we pray. We feel at times as if we pray and no one is listening. And sometimes we feel all prayed out, as if not even our prayers may be worth it any more. Maybe all the prayers we have left are simple prayers. The basics. Lord, teach us how to pray.

Someone has said that God is someone you thank for someone you love. And surely that kind of thanking is prayer.

Anne Lamott says there are only two prayers that she knows. One is “Help me, help me, help me.” The other is “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” Thanksgiving and intercession, two of the most important prayers there are.

“Lord, teach us how to pray,” the disciples asked Jesus. And we use Jesus’ pattern for prayer and we offer up our own prayers, trusting that if we are attentive, if we are believing or if we are doubting, if we trust God or even if we don’t, God is somehow listening and will act.

You will remember that Luke’s version of the teaching about prayer sets it apart and combines it with a parable about persistence, a neighbor who goes to a friend at midnight and begs for bread. And why? Why does Luke do that. Probably Luke has prayed like we do, and known what it is to live with the delay. To have it appear that our prayers are not answered, or are delayed, or worst of all that they are unheard.

Luke must have known what it is to live like we do, with the delay. To pray and wait, and pray again. Which is why when he told the story, he told it this way. A teaching about prayer, and a parable about persistence.

Prayer after all is like standing on the porch of a house where a neighbor lives, there at midnight in the rain, when the lights in the house are out. And you stand at the door and knock. It’s hard to tell if there is movement inside, any sign of stirring, it is so quiet.

But there you are. And what are you to do. You can give up and go away without trying too hard, sure that no one is there inside or willing to answer.

Or you can stand at the door and knock and knock and knock. And standing there, if you are persistent, who is to say that the friend will not answer?

“Ask and you will receive,” Jesus said. “Search and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened for you.”

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¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 3.20.16.

² Romans 8:26