

July 24, 2016

What do you think of when you think of prayer? I bet if we did a survey, there would be a range of answers. What we might hear from Br. Kenneth would probably be different from many of us. For at least some of us, we think of prayer as what we learned kneeling beside our bed when we were young, “Now I lay me down to sleep...” Back then we would ask God to bless Mommy and Daddy and a list of relatives and friends. We may have asked for something we wanted, like a new toy. We may have given thanks for something we enjoyed, like having apple pie for dessert. Learning to pray like this as children is important, like the importance of learning to write thank you notes.

The challenge for some of us is that we have not learned how to pray beyond that childhood way. So when we are thirty or forty or seventy or eighty, that type of praying seems... childish. Or if it doesn't, it might should. So we start to pray less... and then not often... or even not at all anymore. We develop a spiritual void in our lives. What should be at the top of our list of what to learn and practice as mature and healthy human beings becomes something we find ways to avoid.

Still many if not most of us continue to pray. As someone said, there will always be prayer as long as there are trigonometry tests. The best types of prayers are still those we pray from the heart, not from religious obligation but from great need or gratitude. Some have said that there are really only two prayers, “HELP!” and “Thanks.” We can add more words and techniques, but those two words, prayed sincerely, are what orient us to a loving relationship with God and one another. So how do we build on those prayers of the heart and grow stronger and deeper in our relationship with God?

Thankfully we have Jesus as our example to help us learn how to pray. Jesus was known as a man of prayer. Especially in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is portrayed as going away regularly to pray by himself. In the Gospel we heard this morning, Jesus was caught in the act of praying and his disciples asked him to teach them to pray. His response is a shorter version of what we know more commonly as The Lord's Prayer or Our Father. The version from the Gospel according to Matthew is the one we use in our worship and is probably the most prayed prayer in the history of humanity.

Luke's version is simpler and cuts to the heart of what we need to practice when we pray. What is interesting is how it is different from our childhood prayers. There is no long list of what we want or even asking God to bless people. It cuts to the chase and prays for five basic things:

1. Jesus' prayer begins with praise of God. We might forget at times that praise is a type of prayer. In the Catechism of the BCP, there are seven types of prayer listed and four of them are ways that we can worship, praise, and give thanks to God. This is the most basic and important type of prayer. Prayers of praise are preparing us for what our lives will be in heaven.
2. The next part aligns our desires with God's desire for creation—we pray that God's love and justice will rule our world. As people of faith, that should be all that we want.
3. Then we pray for what we need—daily bread, food, sustenance. We need what God gives to all creation. We may sometimes forget that, as we are surrounded by supermarkets and farms. But

for many people throughout history and around the world today, this prayer is real. This is a prayer acknowledging our dependence on God and trust in God's provision.

4. The central point of this prayer-- and some would say of the Christian life— is forgiveness. When Jesus taught his first followers to pray, he emphasized their need of God's mercy and their need to share that mercy with others. That's it—not much more needs to be added. Forgiveness received and given is the defining characteristic of how Christians are to pray-- and to live.
5. The final part in Luke's version is to ask God's help to avoid temptations and trials. We ask God to help us live our lives with integrity and trust in God's goodness. Some tests and temptations in life push us to the edge and this prayer acknowledges that. Jesus reminded his disciples to pray this right before he was arrested and they abandoned him.

If we followed this prayer in word and spirit every day for the rest of our lives, we would learn more fully what prayer is and it would guide and transform our lives. It is a calm prayer, a centering prayer, a prayer that is not anxious about gaining control over others and getting what we want in life. It reminds us of what is important in life and how we can grow closer to God and one another by how we live what we pray.

I taught this prayer when I was leading a retreat for the Alonzo Movement leaders in Honduras. These young men and women work in the roughest parts of Tegucigalpa, working with pre-teens to help them stay out of gangs. They are on the frontlines of Christian ministry. I taught them to use this prayer as a reminder at certain key parts of their demanding day. I think it will help us in our lives, too:

- When your feet hit the floor when you get out of bed in the morning, begin your day by stretching your whole body and praying, "Father, hallowed be your name." Keep praising God as you get ready for the rest of the day. Sing or hum a favorite hymn.
- As you start your work for the day—whether at an office, at school, at home, or anywhere you go to do work-- pray "Your kingdom come." In other words, remember how what you do in life is connected to the coming of God's kingdom. What we do matters!
- Before you have a meal, take time to pray, "Give us each day our daily bread" as a reminder that all we have comes from God. Be grateful. Remember those who need bread.
- As you end your work for the day, reflect on what you have done, said, and thought. Take time to ask God for forgiveness for when you have fallen short; and then forgive people that may have harmed you in some way.
- After dark, when temptations and tests often come to visit, ask for protection so that you will not be tripped up by what will hurt you or others.

That is a simple way to practice praying in a deeper way. It ties our prayers to how we live our lives. By praying this way throughout the day, we orient our lives to God and what we believe is important. With practice, we will become less anxious and we can draw the strength we need from the Lord we love. That is what Jesus did.

In the Gospel for today, Jesus goes on to talk more about prayer. A key aspect for him is ***persistence***. He uses words like ask, search, and knock. It sounds a little like sales training I went through

and even taught back in the day. Why is persistence in prayer so important? Do we need to wear down God so that God will give in like a tired mom buying candy at the checkout counter? I don't think so.

The change that comes from our persistence in prayer is a change in us, in our character, not in God and God's generosity toward us. As Jesus said, God wants to give us every good thing, especially deeper communion with God through the Holy Spirit. But in case you have not noticed, life is difficult. No worthwhile thing comes easily. Think of making a good marriage, raising children, earning a college degree, or starting a successful business. All these things take *persistence*. How much more is persistence needed for us to have a deeper relationship with God and for us to be a part of bringing God's kingdom to earth?

All these things-- a good marriage, healthy children, and a successful business-- come from knowing and trusting and relying on the people you love and work with. It comes from developing a relationship and showing respect. It comes from trying things and failing and asking for forgiveness and starting over. It comes from listening and learning what we need to do differently. Why should we expect it to be any different with our relationship with God and participating in God's purpose for us on earth? It is a relationship-- and prayer is central to how we grow in that relationship of trust and respect and knowledge and love and forgiveness with God-- and one another.

The only thing that can trip us up ultimately is not being persistent; that is not asking, not seeking, and not knocking on doors to learn who God is and what God desires for humanity. God does have a dream for you and me and all of us—all of us. Our prayer should be for God's dream to become a reality for our hurting and divided world. Let us pray:

"O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."