

“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”

Luke 11:1-13

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“After coming to prison, I found a connection to the divine through prayer and meditation. It took me a while to realize that this connection went only one way, much like the connection I had with family members, who over the years had grown less interested in keeping in touch.

I no longer pray, and I wonder at the peace I seem to recall feeling when I did. I was naive in my understanding of prayer, using it to ask for a cosmic Get Out of Jail Free card. I didn't want to do the time for the crimes that I'd committed, or to be responsible for the evil in myself. I had hurt many by my actions, but I wanted God to take away my discomfort. I was not praying. I was asking God to fix everything I'd screwed up.

I'm no longer that naive. I committed those crimes. I am not innocent. Why should I think that God would give me a free pass out of prison? If I did get out, I would only do the same terrible things again.

I am sometimes tempted to return to my old supplications. They felt good, selfishly good. But before I can learn to pray correctly, I need a more complete understanding of what I'm praying for, and to whom.”

...Lord, teach us to pray. We know the words of the Lord's Prayer so well that we think we know how to do it. Unlike the man in the magazine essay I just read to you, we know the “right” words. “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.”

We know the words so well that we barely need to think when we recite them every Sunday. At times we may think deeply about what these words mean, but at other times we may simply mumble them because we're familiar with the rhythm ...and because everyone else is saying them.

They are, in fact, good words. I know a pastor who, when going through a very difficult time in his life, found himself unable to pray his usual prayers. He could not find the connection with God that he had once had. During this period, he prayed the Lord's Prayer. Even though he couldn't quite connect with the words, even though he knew he was just going through the motions, he also knew that he was praying as Christ had taught his disciples to do. The Lord's Prayer kept his prayer life at least half alive in the midst of that hard time.

People who are suffering from dementia, who have otherwise forgotten their surroundings, cannot remember the faces of those closest to them, who have lost the very ability to speak, are sometimes able to remember hymns... and the Lord's Prayer. I have witnessed and have heard amazing stories of residents in an Alzheimer's ward suddenly coming out of their fog when they hear these familiar words: "Our Father, who art in heaven..."

We know the words to the Lord's Prayer so well that, whether we connect with the words deeply, in relationship with God, or whether the words become just rote speech, we forget their context. We say each Sunday, "Let us pray now as Christ has taught us," but we forget that those words are actually in our Bible. The Gospel of Matthew has a more "complete" version, but here are the words in the Gospel of Luke, sandwiched between the story of Martha and Mary and a parable about persistence in prayer.

The second part of our reading this morning, the little parable about persistence, seems almost out of place after the majestic words of the Lord's Prayer that come before it. "Hallowed be your name," "Forgive us our sins (or trespasses, or debts, depending on the translation)" are followed by "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

A prayer honoring God and begging for forgiveness of sins is followed by words that seemingly assure us that we can get whatever we want if we only pray for it. Like the prisoner of the essay I read to you, the words sound like a Get Out of Jail Free card. I don't know if the author of that essay had been introduced to this part of the Gospel, but if he had his selfish prayers would seem justified. Indeed,

this portion of our Gospel has been appropriated by those who preach a “prosperity gospel” that basically says if you pray (correctly), God will shower you with material goods. *The Prayer of Jabez* was a bestseller a few years ago, and it hasn’t fallen far on the bestseller list. It quotes 1 Chronicles from the Old Testament (“Oh that you would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory...”), but the message seems akin to this morning’s message from the Gospel of Luke: If you pray correctly you’ll get whatever you want.

I’ve always had difficulty with “prosperity gospel” preaching, which is even becoming popular in poverty-stricken parts of Africa. It seems so contrary to the main message I see Jesus preaching: care for the poor and oppressed, priority to the needs of others over the needs of oneself. Yet here it is. Here, seemingly, is that Get Out of Jail Free card, that promise of blessings if we “ask,” “search,” and “knock.”

Trouble is, most of us discover soon enough that life doesn’t work that way. It didn’t take long for the prison writer to discover that no matter how hard he tried he could not pray his way out of prison. The African church-goers who hear sermons about getting wonderful jobs and material riches (from a pastor who wears an expensive suit and lives in a beautiful house, despite the poverty of the region) still end up unemployed and poor. We know on a more personal level that such prayers “don’t work” too. We pray and pray that our sick loved one will survive, and they die anyway. We pray and pray that we will be delivered from this bad time in our life, and we still get laid off, the divorce still happens, we can’t pray our way out of clinical depression.

When these things happen (or don’t happen) we wonder if we didn’t “pray right.” Jesus said if we only asked we would get it! Are we not asking the right way? Are we simply not worthy?

I don’t believe that anyone is unworthy of being heard by God, but I don’t always know the answer to why we don’t get what we want. ...Sure, I can understand not getting out of jail without taking any responsibility for our crimes. The Lord’s Prayer itself tells us to ask forgiveness for sins. ...Sure, I can understand not getting that shiny new Corvette or winning the lottery. Rather than a prosperity gospel, I see Jesus preaching a gospel of humility and compassion for others.

But what about those prayers for more “worthy” pursuits? Why do children have to die from cancer? Why do people have to stay in

abusive relationships? Why do families have to starve? Why can't God help people realize that they need help for their addictions? Why aren't these prayers answered?!

I don't have the answer. I don't necessarily believe that God is trying to "teach us something" when a child dies an excruciating death. I don't necessarily believe that God is trying to teach us something when a woman refuses to leave her abusive husband. Yet here the words are in our Gospel, and none of the Biblical scholars I read have a real answer to my query.

I think, then, we may be praying for the wrong things. Could God keep that little girl from dying of cancer? Maybe. But perhaps what we need to ask is that God be with her, with her family, and with us, offering comfort to our souls if not her body. Could God whisk that wife away from the husband who beats her? Maybe. But, for good or ill, God has granted us free will, and she must ultimately be the one to decide to leave him. We can pray that God will give her the strength to leave. Could God whisk away the bottle sitting in front of the alcoholic or simply cause addictive substances to no longer exist? Maybe. But any recovering addict will tell you that it must ultimately be the addict's decision to change. We can pray that God will remind an alcoholic of groups like AA. We might not be able to pray a clinically depressed person out of his depression, but we can pray that God will take away his fear of going to a psychiatrist and give the person strength to get the help he needs.

Ask for God's presence and it will be given to you. Search for God's spirit, and you might not feel it but it will be there. Knock on the door and God will embrace you. You may still hurt. Your brother may still do stupid things. Your sister may still be beaten on a daily basis. But God, whose name we are called to honor, from whom we are called to ask forgiveness, will be there. If those for whom we pray do not receive that for which we have asked, perhaps we, at least, can find comfort in being able to pour out our sorrows before someone. Perhaps we, at least, can find comfort in the notion that we are not alone. Perhaps we, at least, can sense that God is crying with us.
...Lord, teach us to pray...
...And let us, indeed, now pray together.