

Teach Us to Pray

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Apostles Anglican Church

Scriptures: Genesis 18:20–33; Psalm 138; Colossians 2:6–15; Luke 11:1–13

If you have spent any amount of time working in ministry or are known as the most active church-goer in your family, you may have experienced Designated Prayer Syndrome. It usually goes something like this. The plates are set, the food is ready and the family is standing around waiting for the feast to begin. Perhaps there is a throat clearing or two. Slowly, eyes start to wander to you. Your host may ask you to bless the food, or you may just volunteer yourself because you want everyone to stop looking at you.

I struggle with performance prayers. What I mean is, I struggle to get my heart in the right condition when I feel on the spot to pray. I find myself thinking not about communicating and connecting with the God of the universe, but instead picking the “right” words, the perfect set of petitions to not only make clear to God what is needed (as if he doesn’t already know!) and to assure those listening that I know what I am doing. Drawing on our Gospel reading from last week, I approach prayer more like Martha than Mary. I want to get it right so badly that I sometimes end up missing the point.

One of the great gifts of our Anglican tradition is the rich collection of written prayers. Suddenly, the need for me to compose the perfect prayer is gone! I can put my trust in the ways that God has worked in those who have come before and my prayer life is not about my performance. With that obstacle out of the way, I can start

to focus on being formed by my prayers, my own and those written by someone else, so that I can keep on advancing toward that goal of a life characterized by prayer.

You get better at prayer by praying. Just like our physical posture, our spiritual posture is helped by getting ourselves used to the right position. Think of a good prayer, delivered from the heart like a rolling back of the shoulders and straightening of the back, a good opportunity to start over.

And while I give all the due credit to those who have written the prayers in our prayerbook, no one is better at prayer than Jesus. And so, when seeking a prayer that forms us as we say it, there is no better place to go than the Lord's Prayer.

So I invite you to ask this morning with me, along with the unnamed disciple in our Gospel reading for Jesus to teach us how to pray. And in the Lord's Prayer, we find not only the content of a prayer to use again and again, but the sort of people we are to be in prayer.

We can think of the Lord's Prayer as a primer on the basics of prayer. I am learning the banjo right now, don't worry, you won't be getting a demonstration this morning, and I am being reminded of the importance of the fundamentals when learning a musical instrument. I am trying to learn Scruggs style banjo, which involves pretty specific picking patterns with three of the fingers on the picking hand, a pattern that, notably, is different from how I have learned to play guitar. And so I find myself having to go slow in practicing. Focusing not just on a particular melody

itself, but on how I am playing that melody. I need to get the muscle memory right before I can play faster.

Think of the Lord's Prayer as a melody that you are using to play on the musical instrument called prayer. It is not just beautiful in and of itself, but it is teaching you how to play, so that even other melodies that you learn and compose yourself are played with the proper precision and grace. So let us learn the melody, but let us also learn how to play.

We begin with the the address. "Father." When Jesus tells us to pray, it is as children to their loving Father. That should tell us a lot right there. Think of all the ways that are theologically correct for us to address God in our prayers. King. Lord. Almighty God, an Anglican favorite. All good ways to think of God. But Jesus teaches us to pray to our Father. To emphasize the point even further, Jesus tells those who have asked how to pray that we should be persistent in our prayer because God, as our Father, actually wants to give us good things. If even mafia bosses aren't so far gone that they do not give their kids harmful things when they ask for what is good, surely our Father will give us those things that we truly need and are truly for our good.

Although our own experiences of fatherhood vary, God's relationship to us is fatherhood as it should be. When we come with our requests to him we can do so as a child running into her father's warm and worthy embrace. We come to prayer as trusting children.

"Hallowed be your name; your kingdom come." We come to prayer as worshippers. God comes first. Have you ever winced inside as you heard a haughty person mouth

off to the person in charge? The kind of thing that makes you think, “They don’t know who they are talking to?” We don’t want to take that posture at prayer. When we enter the presence of God, we are coming before the one through whom all things were made, the one whom the angels in heaven are praising continually, the one who gives us life. He is the center of gravity of the universe, not us.

But here’s the thing, we are not needed to fuel God’s ego. A posture of worship ensures that we pray for a world that is as it should be. If the sun were not at the center of the solar system, nothing would be alive. Likewise, with God at the center, with his name great, his good will for his creatures is enacted, provided for, and enjoyed. Worship is an acknowledgement of reality, that God is God and we are not.

When we pray for his kingdom to come, that is the kingdom in which no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, no strength known but the strength of love. Not only is the coming of God’s kingdom the thing we should desire before our own desires, it is the means through which we receive what we truly need and what is truly good for us.

When I was a child, I had a bad habit of eating the sugar packets that were on the tables at the restaurants my family would go out to eat at. Thankfully, I was a growing boy and I can’t remember a time when this practice ruined my appetite, and I was able to enjoy the full meal that came later. But imagine if I had so filled up myself with sugar, that I had missed the meal to follow. That is what seeking our own desires over God’s kingdom is like. The fullness that will truly satisfy is coming. Let us not fill up on sugar packets.

Keeping with the culinary theme, Jesus turns to the needs of the day: "Give us each day our daily bread." God is not disinterested in our practical needs. We ought not to let our piety create in us a separation between our spiritual and physical selves. Seeking first the Kingdom doesn't mean that our own needs get left behind, even down to the calories required for us to live every day. We should come to prayer hungry.

There is also a lesson in the daily part of this phrase, "each day."

For many of us food is not a daily worry. Through God's grace, advantage, our own work, or some mix of the three, we don't have to worry about where our next meal is coming from. This blessing can have the adverse side effect of us thinking we've taken care of ourselves on our own and forgetting that all of our daily needs ultimately depend on God. Some of us have lived long enough to learn the lesson that everything can be taken away in an instant, whether we've worked for it or not.

When we've learned to depend on God for even the most mundane and daily needs, we can trust him to lead us in the bigger matters of our life. It's a lot easier to pray, "God, I need your help in this season of my career," when you have already prayed, "God I need your help to eat today." It is easier to pray for God to help you in your marriage when you've already been praying for him to keep you clothed and sheltered. If we trust ourselves to handle the small things, do we think we're going to give up control in the big things? Some days your daily needs are going to be a bit bigger than other days. But no matter the size of the need, "Lord give us each day our daily bread."

We should also come to prayer seeking and offering forgiveness. Both of these are areas in which we can all improve our prayer posture. Some of us need to take greater inventory of the ways in which we have offended and grieved God's heart as we come into his presence. We don't want to be like the person at family dinner who mouths off and angrily leaves the table, only to come back 10 minutes later and act as if nothing happened. God knows our business. Come before him with an open and confessing heart.

"and forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us."

For some of us, the angry Psalms are the only ones in our Psalter. We get so caught up in how we've been wronged by others that we've forgotten the ways in which we've been forgiven. Don't be like the man fuming over \$7000 in debt owed to him when he's just been forgiven \$7 million. Jesus tells us to go that way is to be in peril.

Here is something that has helped me, and it is right out of Jesus' own teaching. Pray for your enemies. If you are finding it hard to forgive, pray for that person. When those thoughts about a neighbor, a family member, a politician, well up inside you and you just want to scream, pray for that person's good. Pray that they would be so filled with God's mercy and love that, not only would they cease whatever evil they are doing against you and others, their lives would overflow in blessing to others.

Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer ends with a plea to avoid the pitfalls of sin: "And lead us not into temptation." We come to prayer for our protection. This line of the Lord's Prayer acknowledges the reality of spiritual warfare, that we are in a struggle,

as long as we are in this life, with the powers of the world, the flesh, and the devil. And this is a struggle in which we desperately need God's help. And because of the one who taught us these words, because of his death and resurrection, that battle is already won.

Christians were encouraged as early as the second century to pray the Lord's Prayer prayer three times a day, but these are not just good words to pray. They also teach us the manner in which we show up to prayer. We come as children of our loving Father. We come to worship. We come hungry for what we need. We come to be forgiven and having forgiven. We come for protection. Even when we aren't using these specific words, these attitudes form us into the sort of prayers that we ought to pray.

And should we get nervous that the Creator of the Universe doesn't have the capacity to hear and respond to our prayers, we only need to read the humorous side story Jesus tells next.

When I ask for something, especially as an introvert, the worst possible response I could possibly receive is this: "It's not really a good time right now." I hate hearing this response because not only does it mean that I won't be getting what I was hoping for, it also means that I am now going to feel bad about the way I have made the person I'm asking feel. I am going to stress about the stress I perceive I have caused for someone else. So I will often decide not to ask for help. Now the obvious problems with my reasoning and my own neurosis aside, how often do we treat God like he doesn't have time for our problems? He's too busy, certainly we don't need to bother him with that.

Here's the story Jesus tells. A man comes to his friend's house in the middle of the night. He's had company come over and doesn't have food for them. He knocks on his friend's door. The friend is already asleep and tells him to go away. But the man persists. He knocks louder. And because of that persistence, he gets in and gets the food he needs to host. So we should likewise persist.

God is not so fickle as a friend reluctant to help you in the middle of the night. In fact, as Psalm 121 chooses to point out three times: "he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."¹ He's the Good Father, who like every good parent is well-acquainted with the midnight needs of his children.

In our house, when we have a crying toddler in the middle of the night, I am not usually the preferred parent. And really who can blame him? But there have been a couple times when Charlie and I have been alone for a night or two. About a year ago, we had one such night and I heard, about 10pm, a cry coming from Charlie's room. Something that was hard for me to believe before I became a parent was that kids have different cries and you learn the difference between them. But there is a difference between the "I am annoyed" cry, and the "I am terrified" cry. This particular night, it was the latter, and I couldn't get in there fast enough. It's as if nothing else mattered in that moment.

¹ Psalm 121:3b-4

If earthly fatherhood, with all its imperfections, looks like that, can you imagine how God feels when his children call out for him? He's the Father running to us while we are still a long way off. He can't get there fast enough.

Prayer is a practice that it takes a lifetime to perfect, and indeed more than that. But pray your heart out anyway. Your Father is longing to hear from you.