

On Prayer  
Luke 11.1-13  
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A sermon preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church  
July 25, 2010

I think of moments alone when I have been deep in thought and reflection and it all seemed like prayer . . . I imagine Jesus in something of that situation, as we look at Luke's passage – in the Gospel this Lord's Day. He is off by himself at the Galilee lakeside, as least some steps away from the disciples.

He's praying. There are disciples nearby who see him there. One disciple asks him, "Lord teach us to pray" . . . and Jesus gives them the prayer which we have come to know pretty well . . . those words – Our Father, which art in heaven . . . Give us . . . Forgive us . . . Lead us . . . Deliver us . . . [and then, he tells a story about a persistent friend in urgent need at midnight , and then gives another reflection about asking and seeking, and God who provides . . . ]

Back to that situation . . . I've found myself in prayerful settings or moments when people have come upon me. I sense that they sensed that I was in a reflective moment. Maybe they thought I was prayerful. Still, none of them asked me to teach them to pray, like we see here . . .

I do recall vividly a moment when I *used* the occasion to pray . . . It was in the moments just prior to the very first wedding I ever officiated at as a minister, almost 30 years ago; it was the wedding of my cousin John and his bride Joanne at her church – in Vancouver, British Columbia. Everything was new to me. I was quite anxious. It was a hot day. A church without air conditioning – imagine that! One of the church's elders was extra considerate and very diligent about showing me everything there at the church, and explaining the history of everything there at the church, and wanting to know everything about me. I appreciated all that – to a point. But, this was consuming a good bit of time. And, as I said, I was getting anxious, and even a bit light headed in the heat. It was then I made a discovery: I suggested to the elder, that I needed some time in prayer. Immediately, the elder could not have been more reverential. Right away, he stopped. He excused himself saying, "But of course." ( Such is the power of prayer . . . ).

Whew! I really did need to pray, and I did so in those moments, collecting myself, drawing on God. But it did occur to me – projecting in to the Gospel's account (the one before us this morning) of Jesus' encounter with the disciple – that the elder in the Vancouver church might have wanted to join with me in prayer, to share and learn. I confess that, give the circumstances, I was glad that he did not . . .

I admit that I am not an expert in prayer. I don't profess to be. I'm not alone in this feeling. The Apostle Paul – that first, most enthusiastic convert to Christ – echoes this admission in his letter to the Romans "We don't know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit (God's Spirit) intercedes for us with sighs that are too deep for words."

There are others who buckle at the expectations and faith traditions for praying.

Douglas John Hall a pastor and professor takes on the concern, and takes aim at, or issue with, any prescribed practice for prayer: He says: “It means that our prayers are legitimate only when they become mental marathons of self-abnegation and immersion of the ineffable Divine – an accomplishment that, for most of us ordinary mortals, is a little like an insomniac telling himself to go to sleep.”<sup>1</sup> Douglas John Hall and the apostle Paul, like lot of faithful people who struggle with faith, admit their failings and stumblings, “we don’t know how to pray as we ought” – as Paul says. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t or shouldn’t, nor that we can’t . . .

You can, you do . . . in your recognizing God, the one present, eternal, with us.  
Beholding God’s presence is prayer . . . at least a beginning to it . . .

On prayer, Mahatma Gandhi, said . . . “Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is an admission of one’s weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.”

Martin Luther, suggested prayer as a communion, connection. He said:  
“Pray, and let God worry.”

Mary Gordon, devoted Christian and modern writer said:  
“Prayer is having something to say and someone to say it to.”

Anne Lamott, another wonderful, and current, writer presents her conclusions on prayer:  
“There are really only two kinds of prayer: help me, help me, help me, and thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Jesus acknowledges the prayers about us – just like that Spirit that intercedes for us – all the matters on our hearts, the cares and burdens, the fears and falling short, the hopes.

Even before he responds to the disciple, he is at prayer with all that – in the silence and separation of his prayerful moments. Let us claim and find those moments as well.

But then he does respond. And the prayer he gives us is direct. Right after the briefest salutation, the prayer becomes: Give us . . . Forgive us . . . Lead us . . . Deliver us.

And this prayer reflects what the object of prayer is for Christians – namely not so much to lose oneself in the contemplation of the Divine, but to find yourself, to become who one is . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, p. 286, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

Who one is . . . Who you are. Who I am. Who we are . . . Each human: Dependent . . . so, we pray, Lord "Give us". Guilty/at fault . . . hence, we pray: "forgive us". Lost, at least vulnerable, ergo: God, "lead us," "deliver us . . ."

And as we come recognizing, noting, naming all of that about ourselves - - - we can find in the most honest acts of prayer that in our real selves, in our very weakness, is the occasion for the encounter with the source of new strength, with God.

That's why, I think, that after Jesus gives the model prayer – when he tells the stories about needy friends in the middle night at midnight, and parents who give what's needed – it's reinforcing his point: that prayer is not a meek, contrived, and merely "religious act. It is the act of people who know how hard it is to be human . . . and who endeavor to be.

Real prayer cannot be faked. It calls us to be real about ourselves and the depth of our need, and to the humility enough to ask for help, to ask God. Ask. keep on asking and it will be given you, and is being given you already in the asking . . .

Let us pray . . . Our Father,