

“OUR REAL NEED”
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July 25, 20010

Scripture: Luke 11:1-13

[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”² He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be thy name. Your kingdom come.³ Give us each day our daily bread.⁴ And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”⁵ And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread;’⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’⁷ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.⁹ “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

Often, the answer you get depends upon how you ask the question or make the request.

Two Irish priests were down at the pub having a pint and a smoke. And as they chatted, they got into an argument about prayer...and smoking. Is it alright to pray and smoke at the same time? Yes indeed, said Father Pat; No way, insisted Father Seamus. So after a few more pints and much discussion, they decided they'd best get an authoritative answer from the Pope himself. Unbeknownst to each other, they both e-mailed the Holy Father and, sure enough, both soon got replies.

Back at the pub a few weeks later, over their bangers and mash, Father Pat reported that the Pope had responded and agreed with him; “Impossible,” said Father Seamus, because I also got a reply e-mail, and the Pope agreed with *me*. “But look,” said Father Pat, “I asked him if it was OK to smoke while praying and he said that if you're praying, your focus should be on God and that smoking would probably distract you from your prayers.” “Well,” said Father Seamus, “I asked if it was OK to pray while smoking and the Holy Father said that you can pray anytime and anywhere, that the Apostle Paul said to pray without ceasing, so it would be quite appropriate.”¹¹ Smoke while praying...pray while smoking. The answer can depend on how you pose the question. But remember, “Smoking can be hazardous to your health.”

Jesus' disciples had a request, a “how to” question; they had noted how often Jesus was in prayer: at his baptism (Luke 3:21)...after healing the sick (Luke 5:16)...after a contentious time with the Pharisees (6:12)...after feeding the 5,000 (9:18)...on the mountaintop of transfiguration (9:28)...after the return of the 70 from their mission (10:21-22). It was almost a constant activity. Given this exposure to Jesus at prayer, it is no wonder that the disciples wanted some instruction in praying; after all, John the Baptizer had taught *his* disciples how to pray.

We latter day disciples apparently long for the such instruction as well, evidenced by the many books, sermons, workshops, retreats, adult education series, websites, and video seminars on prayer: how to pray, when to pray, why pray, the mechanics and techniques of effective praying...the

words and postures and optimal conditions and mental and spiritual preparations. There's the breath prayer, the visualization prayer, the Jesus prayer, centering prayer, hands raised, hands folded, hands open, head bowed, head raised, face to the ground, beads fingered... and many of these instructions are good and helpful. The breath prayer – the slow inhaling and exhaling while breathing in the Spirit and releasing the “unholy spirits” – has been part of my spiritual practice for years. “How to” questions about prayer are worthy and have their place, but finally, it's not about mechanics or techniques...it's about a relationship.

That's what the disciples saw in Jesus' praying...and that's the answer he gave to their request. They framed their question as a “how to?” question. Jesus was wise enough to know that what they most needed was a “who” answer. So Jesus gives the disciples a brief model prayer, not so much as script to follow, though we repeat it regularly, as a reminder of Who this One is who yearns to be in relationship with his children; he gives them a little parable and a vignette that contrast human hospitality and human parental love with God's relational care: **how much more...** The best of our human relations between neighbor and neighbor, parent and child, points us to a relationship of infinitely deeper, caring, attending, responding, knowing, accepting, loving. How much more...

What they saw in Jesus was this relationship lived out in every moment of life. Jesus seemed to be praying so often because his life was a continuous awareness of a Father's presence and an ongoing conversation with a Parent God who is personal and passionate about the welfare of his children. “Our Father...” Jesus was not the first to call God Father, though most titles in the Hebrew scriptures used less relational names for God: King, Redeemer, Light, Fortress, Judge, Shepherd.... Some of the prophets, especially 2nd Isaiah, address God as loving Father, but it is more in the sense of God as Father of a nation, a whole people...Israel, Judah, house of Jacob. As a Hebrew himself, Jesus' understanding encompassed that bonding between God and his beloved people; it is still *our* Father...and give *us*... and forgive *us*...but what is new here is this very personal invitation to know an intimate relationship with the God whose very name had been too holy to speak, but Whom Jesus called “Abba”...Father... more like “Daddy.” And invites us to do the same. It's, trusting a relationship more than mastering a method.

Peter Marty, writing in *The Christian Century*, claims, “If you want to get better at prayer, it's a good idea to work on the central relationships of your life. As one spiritual friend put it, ‘We are only as good at praying as we are at the other relationships of our lives.’ If every good relationship revolves around a strong desire to be with somebody else, [Jesus'] disciples were hungry for a desire to know God in a deep way. Until they could realize for themselves some semblance of the deep bond Jesus enjoyed with the Father, their best prayer practices were irrelevant.”ⁱⁱ

A relationship is nourished by trust and conversation, which are continuous connections as well as periodic practices. Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite brother in eastern France in the 17th century, found himself assigned to the dubious work of cooking and cleaning the pots and pans of the monastery kitchen; here he found that spirituality was not some cocooned exercise of devotion, but the awareness of God's presence amid what he called the mundane, routine, “common business” of life and work. His reflections on this constant life of prayer were later compiled as *Practicing the Presence of God*ⁱⁱⁱ, a notion, it seems to me, of prayer as a continuous relationship, an ever-unfolding dialogue with a trusted Friend that runs through all of life, a “talking to” that does not require the right phrases or the proper techniques but only trust...trust that One is listening, that you're not talking into an empty barrel. Here and there, now and then, we will speak to God at focused times, and try, as best we can, to bracket and get beyond the distractions that intrude, to tell

God what we believe we need, to pray for others, and to listen to what God is saying to us. And other times we will pray on the fly...that running conversation with our Father amid the tug and pull and the hurried and sometimes harried pace of life, the prayer of practicing the presence of God. The Pope was right on this one – either way can be prayer...but only in the context of our real need for a relationship of intimate trust and honesty and candor. Jesus is inviting disciples to approach the Holy One, the El Shaddai...the Almighty, with the familiarity, the boldness, the trust, the shamelessness (which is a better translation of the Greek than perseverance) of a young child running to her parent for both provision and protection.^{iv}

Give us...Forgive us...Lead us...Deliver us...Ask...search...knock. You know how to give good gifts...**how much more...**

A sermon on prayer and the trusting relationship beneath prayer, however, might seem incomplete and maybe too glib without some mention of the deep crisis we have all known in our praying: *unanswered prayer*. Jesus says “Everyone who asks receives, who searches finds, who knocks has doors opened.” And we know that is not always the case, at least as we understand it. Sometimes we mercifully are not given what we ask for, and sometimes our asking reflects our trivial, misguided desires, what Carlyle Marney called our “broken wanters.” But there are those other times we have prayed earnestly and protractedly for what we believed were selfless petitions, hopes seemingly in accord with God’s promises. Prayers unanswered for the healing for a loved one devastated by disease, or maybe us...direction and purpose for a child lost and confused amid life’s twisted pathways... the light of hope to disperse the dark clouds of depression... reconciliation for a once tight-knit, now broken friendship... a return of faith in a long, dry season of doubt... the release of a loved one held captive by addiction... emotional wholeness for one scarred by sexual abuse... So many heartfelt prayers unanswered. Why?...when Jesus speaks so assuredly of God’s parental protection and promise of good things?

The only honest answer is: we don’t know. We don’t know why some petitions are answered as we desire and others are not. Jesus prayed, “Take this cup from me...;” St. Paul prayed for healing from the enervating “thorn in his flesh.” Neither prayer was granted; there is mystery that we cannot wrap ourselves around; through a glass darkly indeed. We have honest questions about unanswered prayer, and if the heart of prayer is an intimate relationship, we can ask these questions, passionately, as the Psalmist often did, and not fear a broken relationship. We can also hold onto that relationship with our heavenly Parent as the only thing approaching an answer, certain, from these words of Jesus, that it is not God who inflicts the grim circumstances upon us and those we love – as punishment, or testing, or faith-strengthening. We know that finally, it is not circumstances that break a life; our real need is to be held in a loving relationship that will not let us go amid life’s worst circumstances.

Daniel Day Williams, in a book on pastoral care of some years ago, *The Minister and the Care of Souls*, says that a breakthrough in understanding came for him when a dear friend was stricken with a devastating illness. Williams says that his response to his friend was one of assurance: “I’m praying and I’m sure everything will come out well for you.” His friend did come through the life-threatening crisis, but Williams says his breakthrough in understanding came in his friend’s kind words: “I appreciated your prayers and your assurances that things would work out. But what I really needed to hear was that you would be closely present with me no matter what the outcome.”^v

That’s the assurance we have in prayer: our Parent God, who knows the pain of losing of a beloved Child, loves us more than any human parent and meets us in the darkest, hardest, most painful

moments of our life. Unanswered prayers are not the result of our lack of faith, or our failure to pray the right way; how easy to take on such unnecessary guilt, concluding that it must be us, not God. We just don't know the answer to unanswered prayer. But we do have honest convictions and unfailing promises: God wants us to pray...boldly, shamelessly; God listens to our prayer, because God, the "Who" of our praying, is in relationship with us. God meets us and is with us in our pain, suffering and fear; and "nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord"...the Lord who taught us not so much how as to whom we may confidently and boldly pray.

ⁱ Related in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neil Postman, among other places.

ⁱⁱ "Reflections on the Lectionary," Peter W. Marty, *Christian Century*, July 13, 2010, p.21.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Practicing the Presence of God*, Brother Lawrence, Carmelite Brother. Many editions of this work; also available on the internet in pdf format..

^{iv} Suggested by David Lose in Commentary of Luke 11:1-13 at Workingpreacher.org website.

^v Daniel Day Williams, *The Minister and the Care of Souls* (Harper and Row, 1979).