

Teach Us To Pray
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Matthew 7: 7-11; Luke 11: 1-8

In one of comedian Jerry Seinfeld's famous bits, he talks about how the number one fear for the average person is speaking in public. The number 2 fear is death. Death! Number 2! That means, he goes on to say, that at a funeral, most people would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy. Now, if we were to appropriate this scenario into a church context, I think we could say something like the number one fear of the average church going person is...praying in public.

I have discovered in numerous church contexts - mission trips, retreats, small groups, church staff meetings... - that the best way to quiet down a group of people is not to say things like "could everyone be quiet" or "listen up everyone". The best way, tried and true, to instantaneously get people's attention is to say "Who'd like to volunteer to pray." What happens, faster than a google search will yield results, is that everyone becomes quiet and suddenly unable to maintain eye contact with the person seeking a prayer volunteer.

Now, I am not trying to read too much into this phenomenon. This is all very tongue-in-cheek, but at the very least I think it is safe to say those awkward moments waiting for someone to volunteer to pray are indicative of our strange relationship with prayer. If we're honest, we all struggle with prayer. We struggle with the words to say, what to pray for, when to pray. We struggle with what is worthy to bring to God in prayer.

And yet, throughout Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, as well as the culmination of the Heidelberg Catechism, through which we've been journeying this summer, we find a pervasive invitation to a life of prayer, not as a peripheral add-on to the spiritual life, but as the very center of it.

The Heidelberg Catechism concludes with a section on prayer, mostly centered around the Lord's Prayer. Paired with the section on the Ten Commandments, both sections comprise the 3rd major part of the Heidelberg under the heading gratitude. One shorthand way of tracing flow of the confession is under the categories **guilt, grace, and gratitude**. The catechism explores our utter need of God because of our sin, or guilt. It then recounts our salvation by grace using the articles of the Apostles' Creed. Finally, it explores how we respond to that grace given to us in spite of our guilt with lives overflowing in gratitude.

In question 116, which you'll find on the bulletin cover, to the question "Why do Christians need to pray" - the catechism offers the response "because prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us. And also because God gives His grace and Holy Spirit only to those who pray continually and groan inwardly, asking God for these gifts and thanking God for them.

Craig Barnes, in his book on the catechism, writes, "Praying leaves us grateful not because it moves God to change the way things are, but because prayer places us in the proper relationship with God." I think that is precisely where our difficulty with prayer resides. We so desperately want a formula with predictability, prescribed actions that will yield consistent results. But God invites us into a relationship. And it is a relationship that can neither be forced upon us nor upon God. In the second half of question 116 we get a sense of this two way dynamic. Somehow, prayer puts us in the place where we will receive God's grace and the Holy Spirit. It's a bit of what Henri Nouwen describes as the paradox of prayer - that it is both something we learn to do and something we receive as a gift at the same time.

Jesus' disciples ask Him to teach them how to pray, like any typical group of disciples would ask their teacher. The prayer He gave them, and gives to us, becomes the model and shape of all prayer. Here's what I mean.

When you hear great jazz musicians improvising a solo, there may be a sense that they are playing whatever they want without structure. But that is far from the truth. The song is in a particular key - Eb, or Fm for example. There is a chord progression to the song. There's a tempo, all of which provide the structure or space within which the musician can improvise. The greater the musician knows the structure of the song, the greater they will enjoy the freedom to improvise in a way that is faithful to that structure.

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. These phrases, from the Lord's Prayer in Luke's Gospel, but the same applies to the longer version in Matthew which we say in worship, are like the chord changes to the song. They provide the shape, structure, and space within which all of our prayers are improvised.

So, when we come to other descriptions of prayer like we find in Matthew 7, we need to keep the Lord's Prayer in mind. It isn't that God is some cosmic genie who is bound to answer every request. We pray in the context of God's coming kingdom - so my own private jet, or the smiting of mine enemies doesn't quite fit the song. The emphasis is on the person to whom we are praying. The Lord's Prayer begins, "Our Father", cluing us into the fact that prayer is a family conversation. If God is our Father, why wouldn't we ask, seek, and knock, and expect to receive from the One who loves us as children?

I suspect that one of our struggles with prayer is that with all of the big problems in the world, we wonder - why bother praying for the specific challenges we face which seem so small in comparison? But we are not praying to a dictator or a distant and hopefully benevolent relative. We are praying to our heavenly Father who works in all things for our salvation and who delights in giving good gifts. We should never hesitate to bring the stuff of our lives, however seemingly big or small, before God in prayer. Within the broad shape of the Lord's Prayer, there is plenty of room for the ordinary concerns, challenges, and celebrations of our days.

In Luke's Gospel, following the Lord's Prayer, there is yet another metaphor for prayer - that of friendship. The setting for these words of Jesus is a house in which the entire family sleeps on the same floor and in the same room. Around midnight a friend arrives who is in a tight spot. They have had an unexpected guest arrive and they have no food to offer them.

Could the owner of the house spare three loaves of bread? No, is the answer. Don't bother me. Everyone's asleep in here and I'm not going to wake everyone up traipsing all over the place putting together a welcome basket for you!

This is the shocking part of the story because the tradition of hospitality in the ancient Middle East would have demanded that the owner of the house help their friend in need so they would not be shamed by not having anything for their guest. Yet, not even the obligations of hospitality can get this friend out of bed. It is the persistence of the friend outside that Jesus is highlighting here. He's just taught them what the shape of their prayers should be in the Lord's Prayer. Now, He is encouraging them to be persistent, bold, unrelenting in their prayer life.

To me, this helps fill out the picture of prayer a bit from Matthew 7 and the Father who enjoys giving good gifts. What happens when it seems like no one is listening? Or when our prayers seem to go unanswered? It's tempting to just stop engaging with God. Almost like letting a friendship dissolve over an unresolved conflict. So much time has elapsed since you picked up the phone that with each day it becomes less and less likely you ever will again.

Don't give up, Jesus says. Keep knocking. Something that really caught my attention in Craig Barnes's book on the Heidelberg was his description of the commandment to not take the Lord's name in vain.

When we think God can't be bothered by the details of our lives, or when we choose not to persist in engaging with God in the totality of our lives, this is taking God's name in vain. When we fail to invoke God's name in the context of our needs and the needs of the world in prayer, we ignore God's character as the one who in Christ became one of us and in entering the details of our lives saved and delivered us.

I did not grow up in a church tradition with confessional documents, printed liturgy, or pre-written prayer aids. In fact, I grew up with a bent toward suspicion of what seemed like dry, rote, emotionless ritual as compared to the vitality of spontaneous prayer from the heart. But, the problem with relying solely on spontaneous prayer is that there are times when the well simply runs dry, when one grasps for words but doesn't find any.

One of my favorite books on prayer is by a 20th century Russian Orthodox priest, Anthony Bloom, entitled "Beginning to Pray." In it he talks about how spontaneous prayer really only comes easily in the extremes of life - in times of great joy or times in great sorrow. He writes, "There are whole periods when you are neither at the bottom of the sea nor at the top of the peak, when you have got to do something about praying, and that is the period when you cannot pray from spontaneity but you can pray from conviction."

The world needs a Church that prays from and with conviction. The rhetoric and conversations we see and hear all around us lately have been alarming to say the least. In my own prayer life I struggle to find words strong and robust enough to communicate my concern over the evil I see in the world - racism, terror, and violence - but also my trust that God has got us.

But we have inherited a tradition that gives us strong and robust language to meet the challenges of our day. We have this prayer that Jesus taught us to pray. Such a simple

prayer, yet each phrase is filled with inexhaustible depths of power. As we dwell in it more and more, far beyond just a prayer, we say we find it has a way of shaping us so that it's a prayer we live.

Question 123 - What does the second petition of the Lord's Prayer mean?

"Your kingdom come" means: Rule us by Your Word and Spirit in such a way that more and more we submit to You. Preserve your church and make it grow. Destroy the devil's work; destroy every force which revolts against you and every conspiracy against Your holy Word. Do this until Your kingdom fully comes, when You will be all in all.

Lord, teach us to pray.

Amen.

Benediction (Q124)

Q. What does the third petition mean? **A.** "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" means: Help us and all people to reject our own wills and to obey your will without any back talk. Your will alone is good. Help us one and all to carry out the work we are called to, as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven.

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