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“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”

A sermon by Mark E. Diehl

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

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Luke 11:1–13; Psalm 85

Do you pray? And when do you pray?

I won't ask for a show of hands: you need not divulge your secrets publicly here!

I already know. At least for some of you I know.

I know because I have heard you talk about your own struggles with praying. And I know because of my own failures in praying.

It typically goes like this:

I don't know what to say. My words don't sound like the prayers I hear other people speak aloud. I don't want to do it wrong. I've failed to be disciplined in prayer and I don't maintain a consistent prayer life. I get distracted and my mind wanders. I can't find a quiet place or moment in my life. I forget.

Our struggles may sound like this:

I only seem to pray when I need something or I'm desperate. Praying feels like I'm trying to manipulate God. I don't deserve for God to listen to me. I'm not sure God hears my prayers. My life is good when I compare it to others: how can I ask God for something more? I should only pray for the needs of others, not for myself.

Some of us, in more honest moments of reflection, may even doubt the efficacy of prayer.

If God hears us, why would God act on our request? Would it be wise for God to give us what we request?

If prayer is a conversation, how come I'm the only one talking? I listen, I really do listen, but I never hear a response. And sometimes I'm glad I don't hear—I don't want to be like some of the loonies out there.

Does prayer change God's mind? Or does prayer alter the situation? Or does prayer change us?

God knows what I need and what I want—why do I have to beg?

When it comes to one of the basic practices of the Christian faith, most of us feel uncomfortable, most of us feel incompetent, and most of us feel faithless.

Barbara Brown Taylor, a favorite author, preacher, and theologian of mine, writes about people who fail at prayer. She says:

I am a failure at prayer. When people ask me about my prayer life, I feel like a bulimic must feel when people ask about her favorite dish. My mind starts scrambling for ways to hide my problem. I start talking about other things I do that I hope will make me sound like a godly person.

I try to say admiring things about prayer so there can be no doubt about how important I think it is. I ask the other person to tell me about her prayer life, hoping she will not notice that I have changed the subject. [*An Altar in the World*, p. 176]

Evidently, for those of us who struggle with prayer, we are not alone.

That is why I am grateful for this story in the Gospels. The Disciples request, "Lord, teach us to pray."

The Twelve have been with Jesus for a while. While hearing his teaching and watching his care for others, they observe scores of common people respond in

wondering adulation, and the religious establishment array itself in furious opposition to Jesus.

Through all of this, they have been privy to the personal practices of faith that Jesus exercised. One of these practices was prayer.

I am certain that those who followed Jesus knew and practiced and used the prayers of their faith. They attended synagogue and prayed in worship. Prayers were used in their homes during the observance of the Sabbath and Passover. Prayers were offered in civic and religious celebrations in the public sphere.

The Disciples were familiar with prayer. They had been taught. They knew how to pray and they did pray. Yet they felt inadequate even with what they knew.

The practice of prayer they observed in Jesus must have been compelling. Otherwise they would never have asked.

Perhaps his prayers were natural rather than forced. If everyone else's prayers were formulaic, maybe the prayers of Jesus were somehow more personal, real, immediate, honest. The prayers of Jesus may have reflected not merely a form of spirituality but a vital relational reality with God. The disciples may have sensed that prayer contributed to what they saw in Jesus: a man for whom God was not merely the bedrock of his being but who made his human existence fuller.

I think what we seek in prayer is a similar relational reality with God parallel to what is depicted by Jesus: a reality that will not remove life's challenges but will make our human existence in all its complications and struggles meaningful and full. I believe that you and I want to know God's will and direction for us if it is possible for us to know it, and we want to be obedient to it.

Yet our expectations may be unrealistic or misplaced. We expect prayer to provide a detailed road map.

What we find at best is a candle that illuminates only the next couple of steps in front of us. We want a vital relationship that gives clarity and certainty. If you have

ever had the pleasure of a relationship with another person, you know it never comes with clarity and certainty!

Like so much of the spiritual life, the challenge is not to maintain control but to find in God a reason and a desire to let go of that control. And so we ask, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

What we have in our Gospel lesson is one of the briefer versions of what is variously called “The Lord’s Prayer,” “the disciples’ prayer,” or the “Our Father.”

Today you and I have memorized it, and we recite it. We teach it to our children. It has become formulaic and rote. It is one of the prayers of our faith, and the words find their way on our lips while our minds are making the grocery list.

Yet the prayer Jesus taught is so straightforward, and is radical in its simplicity. It begins with a personal yet respectful address. The One whom we have to deal with in prayer is approachable and at the same time beyond us. “Father” “Our father” “in heaven” “Holy is your name.”

“Bring your kingdom, your sovereign and life-giving power within our place and time.”

“Give us what we need to live today.”

“Forgive us our failings as we forgive those who have wronged us.”

“And preserve us in the midst of trying times.”

The focus is on God and God’s work within the human sphere. It includes the human need for sustenance, for wholeness in relationships, and for fidelity in the midst of struggle. It acknowledges the reality of failure and our need for restoration.

It is real and it is honest in regard to the dynamics of being human and our very human response to be about our heavenly Father’s business.

In the past, I thought the work of prayer was to make me “more spiritual,” whatever that is. And typically, being “more spiritual” translated into being less human, less of who I was and more of something I am not and never will be.

As one writer has stated, “The best preparation for a life of prayer is to become more intensely human.” I believe that is true.

For me, one of the human prototypes of prayer is depicted in the movie and play *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye is a poor laborer with five daughters living in Russia. He talks with God throughout his workday in an easy yet respectful manner, and honestly shares his complaints and his joys and his hopes.

Is that too complicated?

Anne Lamott speaks of her simple experience of prayer in a book titled *Help, Thanks, Wow*. For her, those three words express the nature of her prayer life and the appropriate response of one human being to the remarkable grace and mercy and love of God. Help! Thanks! Wow!

It is other people’s experience such as Anne’s that makes me believe prayers are uttered within our hearts and upon our lips that we do not realize or recognize as prayers. The fancy address to the Almighty is missing, the wordiness of a proper prayer is absent—all that is left are singular words that express our true and basic reliance upon God: help, thanks, wow!

The Apostle Paul speaks of prayer at times as inarticulate groanings given to us by the Spirit that express our deepest needs and desires and hopes. [Romans 8:27]

Last fall, my wife, Mary, called me to the kitchen. The back window overlooks a bed of flowers, and a humming bird was hovering from stem to stem among the daisies and zinnias. We watched in silence this remarkable scene of beauty for several minutes. We. Were. In. Awe.

Could that have been prayer?

It evoked within me a sense of reverence and appreciation. I was confronted with a reality beyond and outside of myself. It was a pure gift.

The prayer Jesus taught his disciples places people in a context which is beyond one's self.

“Your reign of justice and mercy come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” When Jesus preached, he told his listeners, “The Kingdom of God is near, it is in your midst.” This realm, this rule of God is available to join and be part and parcel of. It includes making right what is wrong, creating justice, providing for those in need, showing mercy, bringing healing where we can, being present with people no matter their distress.

Undoubtedly, this is a reality beyond our present experience.

Prayer can help us lean in to our humanity, stir what makes us who we are, and push us beyond ourselves at the same time. The model of Jesus' prayer can help us do the same thing.

Perhaps we have been too hard on ourselves about whether or not we are praying. When we find ourselves in awe or in pain and recognize the presence of God in that moment, a God who most certainly is in every moment and place where we are, we are praying.

Jesus directs those who follow him to uncover a reality beyond themselves. A reality that embraces our basic needs but extends to all creation, to all people, and the enterprise of God's work in that creation. When our awareness encompasses these kinds of concerns, we discover the need for something and someone beyond ourselves. We discover a God of love and mercy and grace.

Lord, teach us to pray.