

"Lord Teach Us to Pray"

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 17
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, July 25, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 18:20-32; Colossians 2:6-15; Luke 11:1-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Lord, teach us to pray. Knowing the little we do about the first disciples of Jesus, we can safely assume they already knew how to pray. They were, after all, observant Jews who were steeped in the practice, having been taught by their parents who were taught by their parents how to pray in the synagogue or temple, and when they arose in the morning, and when they readied for sleep at night. Technique was not the issue.

Well, maybe it was at least part of the issue. Jesus was Jewish, too. But Jesus really knew how to pray. Praying was as natural to Jesus' life as breathing. Jesus' taking time for prayer did not look like an interruption in the flow of events of his day, but rather, a part of his day that appeared to be seamlessly woven into all the other parts of his day. And the disciples wanted a prayer life like his.

While all four Gospels note Jesus' robust prayer life, it is Luke who tells us how, day after day—from Jesus' baptism at the River Jordan, to his journey from town to town as he healed and taught the crowds, to his hours on the cross—Jesus consistently turned to prayer with the one he called "Abba." Father. Or more accurately, a familiar name akin to "Daddy."

Lord, teach us to pray. The disciples did want to know how to pray. If there was a technique, then show us, they said.

I guess Jesus' disciples over the generations have made the same request. The sheer number of books today dealing with prayer life, daily Christian prayer practices, and this elusive thing we tend to call "spirituality" attest to the fact that many of us are looking for guidance here. Wouldn't be at all surprised if someone has published *Praying for Dummies*. Maybe some of us would be tempted to purchase it.

There are folks for whom prayer is indeed as natural as breathing, and prayers form on their lips as easily as "Good morning" and "Thank you" and "Have a nice day." But there are plenty of us, including pastors, who find praying, well, awkward. We wonder if we're doing it the right way. We wonder if our petitions ought not be more noble and high-minded, and not seem so needy and self-serving and even self-promotional. Most of all, we wonder...when we finally figure out just how to pray, if we'll actually do it more often, and in response, if God will answer more often.

Lord, teach us to pray. Jesus does give the disciples a “technique,” if we want to call it that. He teaches them a simple prayer. Not too formal as to sound stiff. Not lacking in praise. Not neglecting the truth of our neediness. Not too short that it leaves out something important. Not too long that you can’t remember it. Versions of this prayer, centuries later, are voiced by children in Vacation Bible School and grown-ups cloistered away in religious orders and by you and me, every Sunday.

But I do not think Jesus meant it to appear as if he was merely teaching “technique.” The disciples may have been asking how to pray. Jesus was teaching them **to** pray. There’s a big difference.

And all the technique in the world doesn’t matter for not if the prayers we pray aren’t based on a relationship of trust in someone we know who happens to know us.

Lord, teach us to pray. To pray is like the way I experienced Halloween as a child. Now, you’re probably wondering why I bring up the subject of Halloween—ahhh, you obviously had too much sun at the beach this week, Pastor Nancy. Well, no. It seems to me that children today believe that where Halloween is concerned, the candy’s the thing, and the more candy obtained the better. Race from house to house at breakneck speed. Have a second container handy when the first is full. And make sure you get to the house where you don’t even need to ring the doorbell. There’s a sign that says, “Happy Halloween. Take one bag of Skittles, please.” Yeah, right. Like a 10-year-old boy will stop at one bag of Skittles.

Let me tell you about my experience with Halloween. As a child, I really loved the holiday, but the candy part was incidental, a fringe benefit. Wearing my Dad’s old sailor uniform cut down to size, with a mask over my eyes, I’d not journey far—never as far as Jackson Avenue, where I didn’t know anyone. But I’d go up Spruce Street, across Cardott, and down Euclid Avenue to the homes of people I knew. The ritual was always the same. Ring the doorbell, shout “Trick or Treat,” and then grown-ups I knew, like my Aunt Gertie, or Mrs. Behun from church, or my 3rd-grade teacher Mrs. Engemann, would invite me in, and try to guess who I was. While it was fun to fool them momentarily, what I liked best was when the mask was off and they’d say with delight, “Why, it’s Nancy!” Frankly, the candy tasted sweeter coming from someone who knew me, who cared about me. I know it sounds quaint, but that’s really what Halloween was like when I was a child.

And I figure prayer is a little like that. Like knocking at the door of someone you know on Halloween—someone like my 3rd-grade teacher Mrs. Engemann. She’ll invite you in. She’ll be delighted to discover it is you. You will spend some time together in conversation. She’ll put candy in your bucket, and add a little for good measure. And she’ll tell you that you can come back anytime, for you are always welcome.

Which is exactly where Jesus takes the disciples on their quest to learn to pray. Yes, Jesus offers a “technique” with what we now call the Lord’s Prayer. But more than that, Jesus reminds his disciples of the nature of the relationship involved.

First, remember how I said that Jesus' prayer opens up with a title for God that is affectionate and familial: Abba. Daddy. It's not "Lord God Almighty" or "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob..." Jesus sets the tone from the beginning with a name that says God is not way out there or up there somewhere, but right here in the midst of life and we can know him in a deeply personal way—the "Daddy" who cares for his children in every place and time.

Second, Jesus tells the disciples a story about a man who gets an unexpected guest and realizes he needs bread to feed him to be hospitable. He himself doesn't have any bread, but he knows his neighbor does. Of course, it would have to be midnight. But we are talking about his neighbor, after all. We're not talking about a Facebook friend, mind you—any of our 457 friends we've "friended." I'm talking about a neighbor friend who lives right there in this man's community. They see each other every day, socialize and share. They help each other. It was the kind of friendship where you could even risk calling on them at midnight. They might be a little cranky, and might even initially refuse because it's inconvenient, but, boy, would they be mad if they had learned later on you had a need and you didn't call on them for help! That's the kind of relationship they have. So at midnight, the man knocks and knocks and knocks until the friend grants his request and gives him bread for his unexpected houseguest.

Well, suggests Jesus, if you can count on a friend and neighbor like that, how much more you can count on God. *Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.* Even more than the very best friend you can imagine, God is ready to help. God will respond. And just as a true friend would be highly upset that you didn't tell them when you needed their help, God wants to know from you and me what's going on in our lives.

To press the point, Jesus gives another example—this time, of good parenting. A parent who cares about their child wouldn't give them something that would cause harm, like a scorpion or a snake. A parent who cares about their child gives them good gifts, the things they really need. And again, says Jesus, how much more will the heavenly Father give to those who ask him. (In fact, Jesus tells us that God will give us more than just those things that meet our daily needs. Like the extra candy Mrs. Engemann would drop in my bucket for good measure, God will give us his Holy Spirit, which is power that sustains us at all times, and even helps us pray when we can't find the words.)

You know, Jesus' words here can be trusted, because he himself has that deeply personal relationship with God the Father since he is, after all, God's Son. Jesus' words can be taken to heart, because his own self-giving on the cross has made it possible for you and me also to be sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. We have this same wonderful relationship that Jesus has with the Father. We have this same wonderful relationship where you and I are always welcome to come back into daily conversation with God. We just need encouragement to live it. **AMEN.**

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