



“Teach Us to Pray”

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday & Sunday, July 27-28, 2019

All Services

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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Luke 11:1-13

I'd always thought I was bad at praying. I rarely prayed. I never knew what to say. I felt silly and petty. I wondered if God thought my prayers

were stupid, unimportant, not eloquent or well said. Bottom line: I didn't like to pray.

That was until I met Matthew. I met Matthew in the mental health unit of the hospital where I was a chaplain intern several years ago. Matthew had schizophrenia. His disease caused voices to speak loudly in his ears, calling him worthless, bad, and unlovable. He couldn't seem to quiet them. He believed that his own voice wasn't loud enough or strong enough to overpower those that spoke so loudly in his ears. These voices made it near impossible for him to pray, so he called on me. He asked me to voice his prayers to God, and together over the span of several weeks, we both learned something about prayer.

I learned that I can pray. I can put my thoughts and the thoughts of others to words before God. I learned that prayer isn't silly, no matter what you're praying for. I learned prayer is never petty because what's on our hearts is our truth and God wants to know our truth. I learned that prayer is simply showing our hearts to God, showing every piece of our being to God.

And I think Matthew learned that his voice was stronger than those voices. His voice was louder than those voices, and that his prayers mattered to God. God heard his voice because prayer was stronger than his disease.

In our story for today, the disciples see Jesus praying. One of these disciples bravely asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Teach us to pray. These words are a prayer in itself. Perhaps all those years that I doubted my own prayers, that is what God heard me saying: “Teach me to pray, Lord!”

What comes out of this request – this prayer – is what we now call the Lord's Prayer. I've often wondered if Jesus' intent with these words were meant to institute a prayer that Christians from then on would pray every time they gathered together. And of course, there's nothing wrong with our praying of the Lord's Prayer whenever we gather. Have you ever witnessed someone with dementia pray the Lord's Prayer? This prayer speaks louder than that disease as well!

Jesus also shares a parable to teach his disciples about prayer, but also about who God is. He tells this story of two neighbors. In the middle of the night, one of these men receives a surprise visitor, but he's unable to feed the visitor; he's all out of bread. So, he goes to his neighbor and pounds on his door, asking for help in feeding this visitor. This neighbor responds in a harsh manner, refusing to help because the whole house is already in bed and the doors have been locked. Yet, we are told the neighbor eventually does help him.

Now, our NRSV translation tells us that it is the persistence of this man that causes the neighbor to get up and give him the bread. However, this is when our bible translations fail us, or at the very least lead us astray. This Greek word here doesn't really mean 'persistence,' and if we view it as such, it says something problematic about who God is. You see if we view this word as 'persistence' this story tells us that God is reluctant and sometimes unaware, that God needs us to provoke and incite God to act on our behalf. That's not who God is at all. Rather, God is eager. God is always aware. God doesn't need us to say or do anything to cause God to act because God is love.

So, instead of 'persistence,' this word would be better translated as 'shamelessness,' as in "a lack of sensitivity to what is proper, a willful lack of concern" or being bold and unabashed. And for me, this translation helps. As someone afraid to pray because I might say the wrong thing, sound petty or silly, being shameless before God in prayer means sharing my whole self with God. It means showing my heart to God, bringing all that I am to God. It means being unconcerned with what others might think about what I pray for or how I form my prayers. God loves us for who we are so why should we try to hide anything from God? Prayer is about showing God our hearts, saying what's on our hearts to the best of our ability because ultimately, God is aware, God knows, and God hears our prayers. So, let us be shameless before the God who loves us.

C.S. Lewis, the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, famously said that prayer changes him. He wrote: "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. [Prayer] doesn't change God. It changes me." It changes me. Prayer changes us.

For me, prayer changes how I view myself, how I hear my own thoughts. It tells me that who I am and what I think matters to God. It tells me that I am worthy and that I am loved, that I am forgiven and accepted for all that I am. I think prayer did the same for my friend, Matthew. How might prayer change you, friends? How has prayer changed you?

Okay, one final thought on prayer for today: Amen. We often end our prayers with this beautiful, simple word. Amen. So, what does it mean and why do we say it? Simply, amen means "let it be so," or "and so it is," or even more simply, "truly." This little word says so much about what prayer is. It definitely tells us that prayer is truly showing God our hearts because when we conclude our prayers with 'amen,' we are lifting up all that we are to God. We are lifting up our hope, our emotions, our shortcomings, our thoughts, and yes, our hearts.

So, it seems appropriate to end this sermon with a prayer:

The Lord be with you.

Let us pray. Let us show our hearts to God.

Good and gracious God: Your name is holy. You provide. You forgive and you protect. Give us your Holy Spirit. Give us the courage, the bravery, the willingness to show you our hearts. And remind us of your never-failing love, the love we have experienced through your Son, who taught us to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.**

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