

“Seek, Ask, Knock”

Practicing Prayer

October 17, 2021

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

“Lord, teach us to pray.” Apparently, according to Jesus and his early followers, prayer was considered a discipline that must be taught and practiced. This morning I want to consider what Jesus has to say about how we are to pray. Is it about the mechanics of prayer – how eloquent we can be, our use of words, where and with whom we pray? Lord, just exactly, how are we to pray?

Three ministers were talking about prayer in general and the appropriate and most effective positions of prayer – that is what we tend to focus on in life – the mechanics and not the content/purpose. As they were talking, a telephone repairman was working on the phone system in the background. One minister, a Baptist pastor, shared that he felt that the key was in the proper positioning of the hands. He always held his hands together, pointed upward as a form of symbolic worship or open to receive the Holy Spirit through his hands. The second minister, an Episcopalian pastor, suggested that real prayer was conducted on your knees. The third minister suggested that they were both wrong – as a devout Catholic who had studied the Bible and the practice of the early church extensively – he contended that the only position worthy of true and sincere prayer was while stretched out flat on your face. By this time the phone man couldn’t stay out of the conversation any longer. He interjected: “I have

found that the most powerful prayer I ever made was while I was dangling upside down by my heels from a power pole, suspended forty feet above the ground.”

So, let’s be honest this morning – sometimes our most fervent and consistent prayers are when we, or the ones we love, are embroiled in some crisis – a crisis of body, mind or spirit. There are times when we are more persistent, consistent and humble in our prayer life than at other times. Years ago I registered to take a continuing education class at Columbia Seminary entitled “Christian Spirituality” taught by Dr. Al Winn. Dr. Winn was an ordained Presbyterian pastor and had served for many years in the local parish before becoming Moderator of our General Assembly, president of Louisville Seminary in Kentucky and then adjunct professor of Christian Spirituality at Columbia Theological Seminary. He was the author of half a dozen books exploring this topic of Spirituality- “A Christian Primer” being my favorite and I commend it to you. During our first class he described his prayer life as sporadic. Now, it only took a few minutes in Dr. Winn’s presence to determine that he was one of the most spiritual men you will ever know. He was intensely aware of God’s presence in his life and in the lives of those around him. I considered it a blessing to be a student in one of Dr. Winn’s seminars. I was shocked to hear him talk about how he often would wait until late at night, while getting ready for sleep, to pray and he would fall asleep before getting very far down his list of petitions. Prayer is a discipline, he explained, like any other discipline. We must continue to practice with perseverance and allow others to instruct us in our spiritual disciplines. And when we admit our weaknesses in our prayer life – and we all

have our own weaknesses - it is then that we can experience God's grace and begin anew. For the purpose of prayer is not to get what we want from God, it is to be transformed by God's purposes in our lives. So, this morning let's consider our prayer life together.

The disciples must have been aware of their own weaknesses in prayer and so they ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. And this is how he answers.

Prayer for Understanding

Read Luke 11

When you pray, pray like this.....

There are two parts to this prayer which Jesus teaches. It begins with a focus on who God is in our lives. It does not, **does not**, begin with our needs and our petitions. It begins "Our Father". When we are praying, if we are not just talking to ourselves, and sometimes I believe that is exactly what we are doing – projecting our desires, who are we addressing? "Our Father," says Jesus. Jesus called God "Abba" which is the family word for father; it denotes familiarity and intimacy, compassion and caring. Jesus is describing God as a personal engaged parent, who lovingly cares for all his children. In a day and time when Jesus' contemporaries made God so remote and transcendent that they could not even pronounce the sacred name for fear of punishment, Jesus cried "Abba, Father" and taught his disciples to do the same. God as intimate, loving parent

was a *radical, even rebellious*, new understanding of the divine nature of God for the first century Jewish community.

Jesus also teaches us to pray “Our Father” – “Our” not “My”. If you come from a family with brothers and sisters, you quickly learn that there are some things you cannot ask a parent to do. God has no “only” children. You cannot ask for personal advantage that will cost one of God’s other children dearly. The “our” in “Our Father” connects us as brothers and sisters who pray for one another as well as ourselves. To say “Our Father” means that we pray as one member of a community of beloved children, as one member of a family of many.

“Who art in heaven.” To say “Our Father, who is in heaven” is to speak of the “otherness” of God. The prophet Isaiah says it best: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55: 8-9) God’s way of being, God’s way of knowing, God’s way of loving *is not* just like ours. God can never be fully understood or grasped. We cannot project our human images onto God. God is not simply more than who we are; God is holy other. We were created in God’s image, not God in our image.

“Holy is God’s name.” God’s name is to be kept holy; set apart from other names. “Holy is God’s name” is a petition for the restoration and reverence of God in our secular world. It seems to me we use God’s name a little too loosely in our world – we use God’s name to justify our actions, to maintain power or

control, to get what we want in prayer, to express our intense dislike, and in some situations distance ourselves from other people. In our secular world we use God's name a little too casually. The people of Israel understood that to call on the name of the divine was to unleash a power in the world that was to be both feared and worshipped.

After, after recognizing through prayer the truth of who God is, we then pray for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done. What does it mean to pray for God's kingdom to come?

It implies that there are multiple kingdoms – our very human kingdoms and God's kingdom. Dr. Winn says that when we pray for God's kingdom to come, we are not praying to be taken out of the political order into some heavenly sphere where no decisions have to be made about how power and money and services are to be distributed among people. One of the things I discovered when I learned to sail was that to be a good sailor, you must learn to navigate by watching the horizon and not by only looking at the world within your immediate space. When we pray for God's kingdom and will, we are watching the horizon and recognizing the disparity between what we experience in our world and God's will for all creation. Dr. Winn says "There is a radical difference between prayer as getting God to do our bidding and prayer as increased self understanding and changing us to conform more nearly to God's will. The purpose of the first is to get something and the purpose of the second – praying for God's will and kingdom – is to **become** something." The truth is, we would much rather be the Lords of our own kingdoms; we prefer our wills to

God's. We long to be self sufficient and in control of our destinies. And that self absorption causes us to miss God's kingdom in our midst and our part in helping to unveil God's kingdom.

Now we come to a turning point in the Lord's Prayer. After praying to "Our Father" and praying for God's kingdom to come, now we name our concerns for our affairs. – our bread, our sins, our temptations. We begin with God's great purposes, but we do not end there. Jesus invites us, in Part Two of the Lord's Prayer, to move on to our own needs, because we can carry everything to God in prayer, but now our petitions are placed within the context of God's perspective for all God's children.

"Give us this day our daily bread." Give to "us" not just me. We pray that not only will we receive from God what is needed for our sustenance and survival, but that all God's people will receive sufficient bread for today. Americans comprise 6 percent of the world's population and consume 2/3 of the world's resources. Obviously, we do not think globally when we pray for God to give us our daily bread. Dr. Winn contends that "there is no greater sin than allowing some of our brothers and sisters to die when we have the capacity to save them. It is sheer hypocrisy for affluent people to pray this prayer and remain uninvolved in the struggle for justice for all people. Give us bread, not cake – this is a demand for a radical simplification of life. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are asking for bread enough for our neighbors around the world." It is not enough to pray it, but our prayer for others demands that we live it. Our ability to share is directly proportionate to either our attitude of

abundance or our selfish fear of scarcity. God has blessed us abundantly and will continue to bless us, not that we might hoard those blessings, but in order that we might share those blessings with God's people.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And don't let us forget that we all have need of grace. The minute we put our judgment robe on, Jesus reminds us to not only care about the speck in our neighbor's eye, but the log in our own.

Lead us and deliver us, because we all are lost and wander.

The Empty Chair

A man's daughter had asked the local pastor to come and pray with her father who was dying. When the pastor arrived at the man's home, he discovered the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The pastor assumed the elderly father had been informed of his visit and the empty chair was placed there for him. "I guess you were expecting me," he said. "No, who are you?" "I'm the new pastor at your church and I just assumed the chair was for me." The bedridden man responded, "Oh, yes, the empty chair. Would you mind closing the door? I have something to share with you that I have not shared with anyone, even my daughter."

Puzzled, the pastor shut the door. The dying man then continued, explaining, "All my life I have never known how to pray. At church I used to hear the previous pastor talk about prayer, but it always went right over my head. I thought I was talking to myself, so I abandoned prayer – until one day about four years ago my best friend said to me, 'Joe, prayer is a simple matter of having a conversation

with Jesus. Here's what I suggest. Sit down on a chair and place an empty chair next to you and believe Jesus is sitting there next to you. Jesus promises us that he will be with us when we talk to him. And listen to how Jesus might respond to you.' So, I tried it and I've liked it so much that I do it a couple of times every day. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd send me off to the funny farm." The pastor was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the dying man to keep talking to Jesus. Two nights later the daughter called to tell the pastor that her father had died. She explained that her father had seemed at peace. She continued, "Before I left the house in the afternoon, my father told me one of his corny jokes and then kissed me on the cheek, saying goodbye. When I returned to the house an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange. Apparently just before Dad died, he leaned over the bed and rested his head on an empty chair beside the bed.