

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – July 28, 2019
Luke 11:1-13

What is prayer? We all pray whether we think of it as praying or not. Prayer often doesn't look like what we would expect – it is not always packaged in the common image of one kneeling with eyes closed and hands held together, speaking silently to God. Prayer comes in as many forms as one can imagine.

Sometimes, prayer is found in the on-going mental dialogue we have with ourselves. Prayer may be found in the wordless cry of anguish when a heart is breaking. It may be found in the warm and joyful expression of awe at a beautiful sunset or the stunned silence experienced when marveling the mysteries of the night sky. It may be found in the midst of hysterical laughter shared with your best friend in which your belly aches and your eyes water, and it may also be found in the moments when you have nothing to offer this friend in the midst of her sorrow but your open arms and the willingness to join in her tears. Prayer may be found in the deep sighs expressed for our own disappointments in life, as well as in our shouts of joy in celebrating good news. Prayer may even be found in our expressions of deep anger when we shake our fists at God when confronted with the great injustice and lack of love we experience in the world.

Other times, prayer may look a bit more like one would expect. We find prayer visible in our corporate worship, in our offerings of grace before meals, and when we are afraid or suffering. And, in times of public tragedy, we find that prayer explodes across social media, new reports, official statements given by governmental representatives, and many otherwise secular areas.

So, if all of these may be expressions of prayer, then just what is that act we call prayer? Our prayer book defines prayer as “responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.”¹ With this broader understanding of prayer as our response to God's presence and action, we can understand prayer as more than praise, petition, and penitence, but also as a way of cultivating relationship with God.

Our prayers, in whatever form they may take, are part of a larger and on-going dialogue between the God of all creation and His beloved creatures. It is this dialogue that builds and shapes the nature and vitality of our relationship with God. And I believe that when this dialogue reflects the richness and variability of human experience and emotion – the good and the ugly – it becomes a relationship forged in truth and an offering of our whole selves.

Most of us, however, think we should “curate” this dialogue – we prefer to selectively limit the nature of the communication only to that which reflects our best selves. We only feel it is ok to present to God our expressions of thanksgivings and praise and our petitions for our needs or those of others. The problem is that when we limit our relationship with God to merely what we feel is appropriate, we limit the extent to which we are in relationship with God. By only showing our best selves, we hold parts of ourselves in reserve. But our God calls us to give ourselves fully to Him, sharing our full humanity with its sublime, as well as corrupted and conflicted, parts.

Personally, I have found that I rarely pray in the more usual ways. I struggle with contemplative prayer and I never could develop a scripture reflection journaling practice. I rarely get on my knees outside of corporate worship and I don't have an encyclopedic memory bank of prayers to recite for any given situation. Instead, I have found that my best prayer is to re-focus on the present moment and to invite God to open my heart. Often this is prayer without words and is more visual than verbal.

But when I do speak directly to God in my prayers, I have found I often use the same words over and over. They are like Jesus' words given to the disciples in our Gospel lesson today: simple

¹ Book of Common Prayer, 1979; 856

and straightforward and stripped of flowery language and complex grammatical structure. This prayer almost always sounds something like this: “Holy and gracious Father, break open my heart that I may receive you fully. Take my lack of love and transform it. Comfort and bring healing and wholeness to all who suffer. Amen.”

That’s it. What more can I ask? I rarely ask for anything specific any more – over the years, I have learned to pray whole heartedly but leave the outcomes to God. I will lift up in prayer those who are suffering and are in need of healing, but leave to God what that healing may look like. In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus suggests a similar straightforward prayer to his disciples – one that is that is more an offering of oneself to God than a petition for any specific outcomes.

Luke’s quite spartan version of what we call the Lord’s Prayer is composed of just five short sentences. The first two, “Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.” are confessional statements about the nature of God. They emphasize God’s holiness and sovereignty, and that God’s promised reign has come near.

The next three sentences are petitions for essential needs. First, we are to ask for our daily necessary sustenance, giving us what we need but not necessarily what we want. And as we ask only for our “daily bread,” we remember and recognize it as gift and not something earned, even as we look forward to “tomorrow’s” bread of the eternal heavenly banquet. Next, we are to ask for forgiveness as we also ask for help in forgiving others, acknowledging that both the receiving and giving of forgiveness are inexorably connected and we need God’s help for both. And last, we are to ask for preservation and protection from the circumstances which test and endanger our faith and fidelity to God.²

Even when offering this a model template of prayer, Jesus emphasizes that the most important thing about praying is that we keep at it. The example Jesus gives to support this is rather ridiculous. Jesus says God is like a friend you to go to borrow bread from in the middle of the night. The friend irritably tells you to go away and stop bothering him, but you keep on knocking anyway until finally he gives you what you want so he can go back to bed again.

Now, there are all sorts of ways in which God is not like a sleepy and ill-tempered friend, and this statement is meant to describe an unlikely scenario, but Jesus is focusing on one point of comparison. He is encouraging a kind of holy boldness, a sharp knocking on the door, an insistent and persistent asking that refuses to give up.³ That is what prayer should be like. In our order of worship, the priest introduces the Lord’s Prayer with these words, “Now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say...”⁴ Indeed, if we are truly paying attention to the words of this prayer that we recite, we will recognize that this is no meek supplication and we do well to not pray the prayer lightly.

It takes courage to pray this prayer that Jesus give us – it takes courage to pray not for what would make our lives easier but to pray instead for God’s will to be done here on earth as it is in heaven. It takes guts to pray for forgiveness that is somehow tethered to our forgiving others. It takes great faith to ask only for what God thinks we need.

If what Jesus says is true, and I for one am partial to believe him, then our prayers are powerful. Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”⁵ Jesus encourages us to be persistent and bold in our prayer as the writer Frederick Buechner says, “not because you have to beat a path to God’s door before he’ll open it, but because until you beat the path maybe there’s no way of getting to *your* door.”⁶

² Skinner, Matthew L., *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3*, 2010; 291

³ Wright, N. T., *Luke for Everyone*, 2004; 134

⁴ Book of Common Prayer, 1979; 363

⁵ Luke 11:9, NRSV

⁶ Buechner, Frederick, *Wishful Thinking: A Seekers ABC*, 1993; 84

And even when it seems that no one is listening or that your prayer goes unanswered, don't stop. For I believe it is in the very act of calling upon God that helps us to see and recognize the ways in which God is already at work in the world, redeeming and reconciling all of creation to himself. As Buechner continues, "keep on beating the path to God's door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that, down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer, the God you call upon will finally come."⁷

Amen.

⁷ Ibid.