

In the name of the one to whom all our prayers are offered, God the Father, through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

In this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus has returned to the Disciples from a time of private prayer. This habit of going off by himself to pray is something Luke refers to nine times over the course of the Gospel. Clearly, Luke wanted his readers to understand the importance, the centrality of prayer in Jesus' life.

I am sure that if we laid Luke's Gospel out on a timeline, by the time they got to Chapter 11, the Disciples would have known Jesus pretty well. They would have seen Him in all kinds of situations by that time. And they would undoubtedly have seen Him in prayer – and would have known that He went off by himself to be in prayer – many times. But on this particular time, when He came back, someone asked Him, “Lord, teach *us* to pray.”

Now it's not that the Disciples did not know *anything* about prayer. They did not mean that they literally did not know *how* to pray. They were, after all, practicing Jews. They would have had experience praying, reading Scripture and hearing teachings about God in the local synagogues from the time that they were small. They would almost certainly have been brought up offering some form of Jewish prayer before meals. Something like:

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam
Blessed are You, Lord, the almighty One, King of the Universe

hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz..
who brings forth bread from the earth.

borei p'ri hagafen
Who creates the fruit of the vine

shehakol nih'yeh bid'varo (Amein)
Who made all things exist through His word (Amen)

And they would have known about the sacrifices on the Temple altar, where the life of an animal was offered up to God and the burning flesh and incense smoke would have carried the prayers of the people up to heaven. They definitely knew something about prayer. And yet ... they asked Jesus to teach them to pray.

Luke tell us that Jesus said to the Disciples: “When you pray, say, Father, hallowed be your name. “

Commentators have said that the Disciples were probably a little taken aback, if not downright shocked when Jesus told them to address God as “Father.” While they may, by that time, have gotten used to hearing Jesus refer to God as *His* Father, or Abba (what we would translate as “Daddy”), that did *not* mean that *they* were ready to do so. Again, these were Jews who used terms such as Adonai (Lord) and Elohim (the all powerful One) to express who God is. For Jesus to tell them to call God “Dad” must have taken their breath away. But Jesus wanted to make an important point to His Disciples – one that we need to heed today. That is ... God *is* our Father (our heavenly dad) and wants relationship – through communication with us.

The Merriam Webster Unabridged Dictionary defines prayer as: “a solemn and humble approach to Divinity in word or thought usually involving beseeching, petition, confession, praise, or thanksgiving” There is no doubt that that definition is accurate, but perhaps not quite complete.

You see, what Jesus was talking about with the Disciples that day – the thing that He wanted to make sure His followers understood – was that prayer was not the rote recitation of a formula. Prayer is not simply putting a bunch of words in the right order and making certain that they all get said before you are finished. No ... prayer is conversation.

You might think it strange that an Episcopal priest – liturgical leader of a group of people who are known for their reliance on written prayers – would be telling you that prayer is not about recitation of words. Well, that is one of the biggest misconceptions about liturgical churches in general and the Episcopal Church in particular. The prayers in our Book of Common Prayer are not meant to be simply read through in a particular order and with a particular rhythm, so that our duty to pray is fulfilled. No, the prayers in our prayer book are meant to inspire us with the beauty of their imagery and the eloquence with which they express our needs and desires. And, as the Rev. Dr. Dennis Maynard puts it in his book, Those Episkopols, our prayer book is meant to save us from both excess and omission – trying to put in everything or forgetting to include something important.

But an important thing about the Book of Common Prayer is what it does *not* say. It does *not* say that it is the *only* form of prayer we should use. It is a resource that allows us all to pray together – *in common* – which is good for us as a community. And as I have told you before, it is also a wonderful resource in that it can pray *for* us when we are in those desert times and places in our lives in which we are unable to form the prayers on our own.

But our Book of Common Prayer, through its flexibility, understands that the Merriam Webster definition of prayer is too limited. “A solemn and humble approach to Divinity in word or thought” There is no need for solemnity in *every* prayer. When we, Episcopalians approach the altar of God, by tradition we do so humbly and reverently. But that is not the *only* way. Little children come forward running, or skipping. And they smile (and sometimes to the consternation of adults around them, talk or laugh) as they receive communion. Do you honestly believe that the Jesus who told the Disciples to approach God as little children would disapprove of their unbridled joy? Or how about those times in which something wonderful has happened to you and the only way to respond that feels “right” is to look heavenward and exclaim, “Thank you Jesus!” That is neither solemn nor humble.

Sufi mystics whirl around as they pray. Native American religions often involve dance in prayer. There are Christian groups, including some in our own denomination who worship through liturgical dance. Some people say they feel closer to God when

they sing than they do at any other time. Oftentimes I feel most in tune with God when I can be still and silent and listen. But ... there is something special in my prayer life when I can stand behind the altar and experience the *actions* as well as the words, as we remember and relive our Lord's Last Supper. It is *all* prayer. But I don't think Jesus even intended to stop His lesson to the Disciples there.

With all due respect to Merriam Webster, I think prayer is conversation, through thought, word or activity. I think that is what Jesus knew as well. I believe that Luke's telling of this story – in which he pairs the Lord's Prayer with the parable of the neighbor asking for a favor – is meant to tell us that we should approach God the way we do a true friend – or a beloved Dad: with the love and respect of people who are in relationship; with an expectation that the other person cares about us; and most importantly with the understanding that the conversation is always on-going. Author Anne Lamott is quoted as saying, “When you pray, you are not starting the conversation from scratch, just remembering to plug back into a conversation that's always in progress.”

Jesus told the Disciples to pray persistently. I believe by that He meant the same thing that the Apostle Paul meant when he said that we were to “pray without ceasing.” And because prayer is not just about speech, but also includes thought and movement as well as stillness and quiet, it is possible to pray without ceasing. There is an old saying that goes, “The only way to pray is to pray, and the way to pray well is pray much.”

The nineteenth century congregational preacher and author, Henry Ward Beecher put the centrality and the importance of prayer very well. These are his words:

Prayer covers the whole of man's life. There is no thought, feeling, yearning, or desire, however low, trifling, or vulgar we may deem it, which if it affects our real interest or happiness, we may not lay before God and be sure of sympathy. His nature is such that our often coming does not tire him. The whole burden of the whole life of every man may be rolled on to God and not weary him, though it has wearied man.

Pray always. Bring every aspect of your life, the good and the bad, the important and the trivial before God in prayer. It may not result in your receiving everything you desire, but it will result in the only thing you really need – a deeper relationship with God.

Amen.