



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JULY 28, 2019
THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Learning . . . To Pray Psalm 138; Luke 11:1-13

Is it just me or does anyone else find it odd that the disciples would ask Jesus to teach them how to pray? After all, they were born and bred Jewish and knew by heart the various prayers that were said during worship in the synagogue or when they visited the temple in Jerusalem. They knew daily prayers and prayers for the sabbath and special holy days. Why would they ask Jesus to teach them to pray?

Perhaps they noticed something about Jesus when he prayed. We have all seen paintings of Jesus praying in a garden, hands together, eyes lifted to heaven, with serenity and purpose radiating from our Savior. Maybe the disciples wanted to be able to pray in that way. It could be that they felt their prayers were rather run-of-the-mill while they had seen Jesus pray when he was peaceful and content, when he was distressed and upset, and when he was happy and even laughing. Maybe they felt their prayers should have a broader range of emotion to them. Or maybe they wanted what John's disciples had.

Whoever it was that asked Jesus to teach them to pray added "as John taught his disciples." Apparently, they thought they were getting short shrift and missing out on having their own signature prayer or method like the followers of John the Baptist.

I don't know what John taught his disciples about prayer. Today you can find any number of formulas that will guide in praying. Most of us are familiar with the ACTS form of prayer. ACTS stands for adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. It is easy to remember and guides us through four meaningful aspects of prayer.

I found a couple of other prayer formulas that are new to me.¹ The "Five-Finger Prayer" uses the hand to guide our prayer:

¹The formulas are found on the website *Living a Life-Giving Lent: Discipleship, Discovery, and Depth*; available online at: <https://alifegivinglent.wordpress.com/simple-prayer-formulas/>.

Thumb – pray for those closest to me;

Pointing finger – pray for those who guide us: teachers, doctors, clergy, counselors, social workers, mentors;

Middle finger (tallest one) – pray for those who stand tall: government, civic, and business leaders, police and firefighters;

Ring finger (your weakest finger) – pray for those who are weak: the poor, sick, infirm, infants, homeless, and the powerless

Pinkie (the smallest, the least) – pray for me and my needs

Another formula for prayer invites us to “Take a “TRIP” with God. Using letters from the word “trip,” we ask ourselves the following questions:

T – Thanks: For what am I thankful?

R – Regret: What do I regret?

I – Intercession: For whom do I need to pray?

P – Purpose: What is my purpose or plan? (this day, week, my life)

One more prayer formula encourages us to think about the “PARTS” of prayer as we pray:

P – Praise

A – Ask

R – Repent

T – Thank

S – Share

Again, I am not certain what the disciples were expecting when one of them asked Jesus to teach them to pray as John had taught his disciples, but I do know that the answer Luke records is not at all what we expect. This version is not our Lord’s Prayer, the one we prayed this morning and just about every time we gather for worship. It is not the elegant and ordered prayer that Matthew includes in the Sermon on the Mount with the beautiful doxology that later was added by the Church. In this instance, what Jesus tells his followers is brief and choppy. It is probably an earlier version of Matthew’s prayer to which Luke had access.

This prayer also begins with “Father,” which establishes a relationship between us and God. It uses the familiar phrase, “hallowed be thy name,” an acknowledgment that God is holy. It includes a look to the future in the words, “your kingdom come,” and a recognition that God provides the essentials of life in the phrase, “give us bread for the day.” There is a request for forgiveness which is tied to our own practice of forgiving other people and a plea that God not “bring us to the time of trial,” which we usually say as “lead us not into temptation.” Of course, we are left to deal with whether or not God is in the business of tempting us.

Each of these petitions fits into one of the formulas for prayer that I mentioned or others that you might use. I am not certain, however, that Jesus is interested in simply giving his disciples a mnemonic device for remembering how to pray. He doesn’t say “Amen” and stop there. Instead, Jesus begins a somewhat rambling series of examples that are intended to teach us something important about prayer.

First, Jesus tells what Cynthia Briggs Kittredge calls a “humorous parable” about prayer.² It is midnight when a traveler unexpectedly shows up at the house of a friend. A good host would welcome this friend and provide him with something to eat before offering a bed for the night. The problem is that the friend has nothing to offer. Any bread his wife had baked was eaten with the evening meal. He quickly hurries next door to his neighbor’s house and knocks on the door. Keep in mind it is midnight. What would you do if someone came banging on your door in the middle of the night? At the very least, you would tell them to go away. Everyone is asleep and the door is locked. His friend, however, is desperate so he keeps knocking and explains his dilemma through the locked door.

Now, I would expect this parable to be one of those “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” stories so that the neighbor gets out of bed and shares his bread because the two men are good friends. That is not Jesus’ point, however. Jesus says the neighbor will share his bread, but not because they are friends. He will push the bread through a crack in the door because his neighbor is persistent and will not let him get any sleep otherwise! Do you have any neighbors like that?

²Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, “Reflections on the Lectionary: Luke 11:1-13,” *The Christian Century* (July 17, 2019), 20.

What is Jesus thinking? Are we to believe that God will finally give into our prayer requests only because we keep hounding heaven day and night and will not shut up otherwise? Is prayer simply about wearing God down like a child who wants the cereal with the toy and will not stop screaming in the grocery store until you put it into your basket? Jesus makes prayer sound so simple when he says, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” You may have to keep asking and searching and knocking, but eventually, God will give in.

As if he knows what he has just said really does not add up, Jesus continues talking and attempts a lesson about good parenting. Those of you who have children know how to be good parents. If one of your children asked you for a fish, you wouldn't give her a snake! Or if your son requested an egg, you wouldn't give him a scorpion. Of course not! You can be evil at times, but you know how to give your children what is good for them. Don't you think God will give even better than you! God will give the Holy Spirit to anyone who asks! How about that!?

I would like to have seen the look on the disciples' faces when Jesus finally paused. Had I been there, I would have been shaking my head and thinking, “What in the world is Jesus talking about? Is God a reluctant giver? Is it better to gang up on God and badger him until we get what we want? Why won't God give us what we ask for out of love? Why do we have to be persistent with God?” Besides, Matthew tells us in the Sermon on the Mount, just before he shares the Lord's Prayer, that Jesus said, “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:7-8). If God already knows what we need, why do we even need to ask? At least, would not one request be enough? Why do we have to be persistent? And why would God be reluctant?

I think the disciple's question was the wrong question to ask. Instead of wanting what the followers of John the Baptist had, he should have said, “Jesus, teach us about prayer. What is it? How does it work? What does it mean? For what should we pray?” I think Jesus' response points to the real issue. He does not want to give them a formula that they can pray anytime they want something. Instead, Jesus wants them to pay attention to life, to learn from their circumstances so that they better know what to pray, not how.

Sometimes, prayer becomes a learning experience for us. Our initial request of God may change over time as we learn what it is that we really need and what better fits with what we know about God and how God is in the world. If we pray selfishly for ourselves over the needs of other people, we know that God does not treat one of us better than another. If we ask only for what we want but never consider what another person might need, we abuse the privilege of prayer. If we pray for something bad to happen to another person to get revenge or to benefit ourselves, we ask God to go against God's nature. If we simply hand God a wish list every day, we reduce prayer to an exercise in selfishness instead of an experience of growing in relationship with God.

During Lent, Linda Davis shared what is known as the Northumbrian Evening Prayer as one of our devotions. I think it might be the prayer the disciples needed and one we need as well. Listen:

Lord, You have always given bread for the coming day;
and though I am poor, today I believe.

Lord, You have always given strength for the coming day;
and though I am weak, today I believe.

Lord, You have always given peace for the coming day;
and though of anxious heart, today I believe.

Lord, You have always kept me safe in trials;
and now, tried as I am, today I believe.

Lord, You have always marked the road for the coming day;
and though it may be hidden, today I believe.

Lord, You have always lightened this darkness of mine;
and though the night is here, today I believe.

Lord, You have always spoken when time was ripe;
and though you be silent now, today I believe.³

I think this prayer answers Jesus' parable about the friend at midnight. The first line of each couplet mentions a need we have which God always meets: bread, strength, peace, and so on. The second line of each couplet admits our limitation or, as with the man in the parable, our dilemma: poverty, weakness, anxiety. In light of the need and the limitation, each prayer concludes with the affirmation, "Today I believe." Unflagging belief in God as our Heavenly Father who loves us and provides what we need is the persistence of prayer spoken of in the parable. Despite insurmountable

³Northumbria Community, "Evening Prayer": www.northumbriacommunity.org/offices/evening-prayer

obstacles, believing that God will meet my true needs is the persistence of prayer.

The religious community of Northumbria, which is located in the United Kingdom, affirms as its Rule of Life or “Way for Living,” two things: Availability and Vulnerability.⁴ In being available to and vulnerable with God and one another, like the people in Jesus’ parable, they ask for what they need, they offer what they have, they trust that God will provide what is good and right.

The persistence of prayer on our part is best expressed when we make our life a prayer, when prayer becomes so integral to who we are that our thoughts, our breath, our movements are themselves prayers to God.

Jesus wanted to teach his disciples how to live in order to know what to pray. Like them, we need, not a formula, but an openness to life. We need to be vulnerable and available to one another and to God so that when we ask and seek and knock we will discover what it is that we truly need and how to talk with God about it. We need to trust in God’s love and generosity which leads us to the open doorway of God’s storehouse. There we will find the answers to our prayers.

Lord, do not teach us so much how to pray; rather, teach us about life and the goodness of God so that we will better live, trusting in the enduring love and generosity of God. Today I believe. Amen.

⁴The Northumbria Community, information available at: <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/who-we-are/introducing-the-community>.

July 28, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We often feel the call to prayer, O God, whether urged by other people or, more often, our own needs in life. There is comfort in knowing that we can speak freely and honestly with you. There is relief in knowing that you will sort out our often jumbled and uncertain petitions. And there is gratitude in knowing that you are present with us in whatever need we have.

We also know, O God, that prayer is as much about growing in relationship with you as it is about asking for what we want or need. Help us to better understand our prayer as two hearts speaking to each other. Continue to be open to hearing what we might say and help us to listen to the things you say to us.

Help us to pray with our eyes and ears and hearts and hands open to the world around us. Help us to pray through our relationships with family and friends and enemies. Teach us to pray through our work and play, in our efforts to better our community, in the ways we live out our politics and relationships with one another. Guide us as we pray for loved ones and friends and even strangers who have special needs. Remind us that you already move to take care of us and that your healing power is a part of the creation you gave us long ago.

As we pray, guide us to a place of peace where we know we are loved and cared for. Guide us to a point of action so that we use the gifts you have given us to improve life around us. Guide us to a position of hope so that we never despair about the future but recognize that all of life is in your hand and that you continue to partner with us as we live into the days ahead.

For meeting our needs of the day, for renewing our lives day by day, for never giving up on us and trusting us with life, we thank you, O God. All praise, glory, and honor be yours, today and forever. Amen.