

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of Holy Eucharist
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost; July 28, 2019

“Teach Us to Pray”

Scripture: Luke 11:1-13 (7 Pentecost C, Proper 12C, RCL)

If Jesus' teaching this morning was actually about *praying*, we should have it all down pat by now. We should be experts. How many times has the active Episcopalian uttered this prayer, or similar versions of it, in a lifetime of worship and Holy Eucharist? Thousands! For some even *tens* of thousands. And humankind could fill entire city libraries with the volumes, pamphlets, circulars, scrolls, tomes, lectures, manuals, books, videos, podcasts, tapes, columns, blogs, sermons, and prayers about... prayer. It is one of those things about which people have pondered ---and about which people have written--- for millennia. A trip through Amazon.com turns up:

- The Energy of Prayer
- True Prayer
- The Practice of Prayer
- Prayers that Rout Demons
- Becoming a Prayer Warrior: A Guide to Effective and Powerful Prayer
- Prayer and the Contemplative Life
- The Pappa Prayer

There's *Centering Prayer, Contemplative Prayer, Ignatian Prayer, Augustinian Prayer, Intercessory Prayer, the Book of Common Prayer*.

Do we give time to anything else? Could we possibly not know enough yet about prayer? And Jesus' disciples, people who likely grew up praying multiple times each day, still ask Jesus for a new manual: "Lord, teach us to pray..." they ask.

But I'm afraid we're still learning. I sometimes wonder in these hyper-divisive times in which we live if prayer, along with most every other kind of communication, has become something of a contact sport. Well, I suppose I don't *really* wonder. I think it has. I mean, don't you think it possible, even likely, that Christians all over our country, people of faith of various persuasions, are fervently praying this morning about the same things but with vastly different intentions regarding the outcomes? It's practically unavoidable. Christians can pray about the crisis of immigration, but some will ask God that we never build a border wall while others will pray that God help us put a wall up and put it up soon. A lot of Christians today will pray for our President, but some will be praying that, in the name of God, he achieve his initiatives, while others will pray in the name of that same God that his goals be thwarted.

Yet lest it seem that I am about to wander into the wilds of our individual and personal positions on matters of contemporary politics, what I really want to talk about is prayer and our approach to it, because how we understand prayer and how we go about praying has a lot to say about how we believe in God and how we relate with one another.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk who was also great observer of Christians and their practices, once said that much of Christian prayer he had witnessed fell into that category of... *looking out more for self than others and the world*. The family going on a picnic prays for clear weather, while the farmer prays for much needed rain for his dry crops. And when the weather is indeed clear, the family is sure that God has blessed them, but if it rains, the farmer knows that God has heard his prayer over and above all others. But is that really a sufficient way to see this peculiar communication we have with the maker of the entire Universe? Yet what is one to do if one cannot pray for what one wants?

Well, fortunately Jesus has something to say about this incredibly complex topic... and it took him all of about twenty seconds to say it:

*“Father, holy is your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins, as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not
bring us to the time of trial.”*

That’s it. Jesus’ entire lesson on prayer in a few short lines from Luke’s gospel. But it pretty much tells us all we need to know about how to live faithfully. Look at how this prayer unfolds... It begins with honor to God: *hallowed (holy) be your name*; it aligns our hopes and dreams for the world with the hopes and dreams of God’s kingdom: *your kingdom come*, the prayer offers – not *our kingdoms come*. Give us enough to live each day; that’s all – enough. And when we mess up, don’t hold it against us, and we will try to live the same way, not holding things against others. And please don’t let us be tested by more than we can bear.

You know, no matter the person who offers this prayer and no matter for what reason it is said, this is a prayer that invites no special treatment for the pray-er, it is a prayer that requires no adversary, nothing to pray against; it is a prayer that can be uttered to the benefit of all. I guess we might say it is a prayer befitting our belief in a sovereign God that creates all life and holds it close, a God who cares about all of us like a good parent would care for us. We can pray this prayer with and for anyone.

When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, he gives them at once a prayer so deeply personal, yet so imminently connected with the Creation and with the needs of each and every person alive. We pray for ourselves and others all together. Give *us*, forgive *us* as *we* forgive.

So ask, Jesus says. Ask of God as you would ask of someone who cares, someone to whom you matter. Because you do matter. You won't get a snake when you need a fish. Or a scorpion when you need an egg. Pray for *your* needs, yes, but remember that Jesus uses the *plural* pronouns when he teaches us to pray. Those most basic things which you need are much the same for others. So ask for the well-being of others as well. Prayer isn't always and only about what we want, but what God is bringing into being. "Your kingdom come, O God." A kingdom which includes all of us.