

**“Lord, teach us to pray.”**

A few years ago, Pope Francis made headlines when he made a change to the Mass. This was a big thing. You know, in the Catholic Church, the Mass is pretty standard, fixed. But the Pope announced that he was changing the Lord’s Prayer. Instead of “lead us not into temptation,” which is not the best translation, he said, “let us not fall into temptation.” The argument was that God does not tempt us, Satan does, and we rightly ask God to prevent that from happening. It makes a lot of theological sense, but I can imagine that he has faced a good deal of opposition. For if there is anything that’s difficult for us Christians to accept, it’s changes in liturgy, in worship. Just consider Episcopal churches. Ever since 1979, the Prayer Book has allowed churches to use a contemporary version of the prayer, you can see it right next to traditional version in the Prayer Book, but I don’t know any Episcopal church that uses it. The contemporary version is a more accurate, superior translation, but this is the thee and thou version is version that we have been saying all our life. It’s the form we are familiar with, that English Christians every Sunday, going back to the King James Bible of 1611! But of course the prayer goes back further, all the way back to Jesus.

We see Jesus teach the disciples this prayer in today’s gospel lesson. Throughout Jesus’ ministry, his followers make many requests of him: “Show us the Father. Tell us when the Kingdom will come. Permit us to sit at your right and at your left in your kingdom. Let us command fire to come from heaven and consume the heathens.” Jesus did not often answer their requests, because, we suspect, they were asking for the wrong things. So it says something that when they ask Jesus here to teach them to pray, he was happy to oblige. The disciples, it seems, had finally asked the right question.

That is our hope too, why we come here together each week—to learn to ask the right questions. Because of the nature of the Christian faith, none of us, no matter how long we have been following Jesus, know perfectly what questions we should ask. None of us ever becomes so faithful, so skilled in our discipleship that we become experts. We are always learning how to be Christian. It’s like that old joke about the lawyer who introduces himself by saying that he has been practicing law for forty years. Whereupon his acquaintance replies, “All that practice, you’d think you have gotten it right by now.” Being Christian means we are always practicing, always training, always learning *how to be Christian*.

And a key part of that training is learning to pray. There are, of course, many kinds of prayer—Benedictine prayer, Ignatian prayer, contemplative prayer, morning prayer, centering prayer, coloring prayer, even the Prayer of Jabez—but praying the Lord’s Prayer, praying as Christ prayed, is a particular kind of activity, one which brings us into participation with Jesus’ life and ministry. In giving us this prayer, he is giving us part of his own breath, his own life, his own sense of vocation, of the Father’s purposes. When we engage in this kind of prayer, we are being made into a people whose life together is a sign to the world of this understanding of what God is doing in the world.

Now, it needs to be said that praying in this way does not come naturally. It doesn't "make sense" in the ways we are taught to make sense. It is something we have to learn, something we are taught by trustworthy authorities who are skilled in prayer. This may strike many as odd, that we need to be *taught* to pray. Why do we need to be taught when we can just take a walk in the woods or stay home and meditate on our own? The reason is because it is possible to pray falsely, to ask the wrong questions and desire the wrong things. This is why, when the disciples asked Jesus about prayer, he did not tell them to go off and sit quietly until something spiritual came to their minds. He did not ask them, "Well, how do you feel about God?" He said, "Pray like this, 'Our Father in heaven...'"

This is the Lord's Prayer, prayer "in Jesus' name," the prayer that Jesus invites us to pray with him, to share in. When we become Christians, we don't decide that the Lord's Prayer is a helpful means of expressing our faith. We don't choose this prayer; it's *given* to us—to form us, to shape us, to make us Christians, disciples of Christ. In praying like this, our lives are bent toward God in a way that is not of our natural inclination, and we become as we pray. We become like Christ. We become Christian.

How does this happen? In what way does praying this prayer shape us? Looking at the content of the prayer, we might consider how the Lord's Prayer teaches us to relate to God as our Father, to enter into a parent-child relationship with God. Or we may point to how the prayer encourages us to hope, "your kingdom come, your will be done" or how it teaches us to forgive, "forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Those are all important aspects of the Lord's Prayer, things that inevitably shape our understanding of God and our life with God. But what strikes me most about the Lord's Prayer is the nature of the verbs Jesus uses, how they are all imperatives, commands, asking God to do something for us ("give us.... forgive us...save us...deliver us").

What does it say that Jesus teaches us to speak to God this way? That we should come before God with a list of requests? Do this, don't do that. I think it's safe to say that Jesus does not mean for us to think of God as our cosmic butler, responding to our beck and call. Nor does he want us to see prayer as a matter of "putting coins in a vending machine": Put your prayer in the right slot, push the right button, and wait for the vending-machine God to spit out exactly what you want. No, the reason for all these petitions has little to do with our getting what we want from God, and everything to do with us recognizing our need. In asking God for our daily bread, for forgiveness, for salvation, we are in effect affirming our utter dependence on God. God has given us many, many gifts, yet we remain dependent on God's mercy, goodness, and provision. In teaching us this prayer, Jesus is directing us to bring before God all of our needs, wants, hurts, hopes, and desires. We are to go *to God* for these things, not anywhere else.

That's a temptation we constantly face—to seek happiness and blessing and security in something other than God. We look for love—and other things that we need—in all the wrong places. CS Lewis, the great British apologist, once astutely observed, "Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God." That is certainly my experience. Not the brothel part, of course! I mean that, when I am most tempted to sin, to give in to baser instincts, it is because I'm needing God. I have neglected spending time with God and I sense that something is wrong, something is missing. But instead of turning to God, I try to fill that void with something else. I'm not alone in this, I'm sure. We're hungry spiritually but we reach for a cookie. We're restless for God but we seek distraction in a TV show or novel. We long for community and a sense of

purpose, and so we join a political crusade. We seek intimacy with God but that instant rush is just one mouse click away through eBay, online gambling, or a porn site. But of course these things can never satisfy, they can never fill the God-sized hole in our lives. And so we're left frustrated and disappointed. In teaching us the Lord's Prayer, Jesus reminds us where, or rather *in whom*, we will find our needs truly and finally filled.

Now, to be sure, even though Jesus assures us, "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find," the fact is, there are many times when God says "no" to our requests. Often after some time, we can come to accept it because we realize we're asking the wrong questions, we're not asking for the right things, because the things we are asking for would not be good for us. Like a parent who says "no" to their 9-year-old when they ask to stay up till 11 pm watching a horror movie, God says "no" because what we want is not good for us, and God wouldn't give us something that is not good for us. As Jesus says to his disciples, "Who would give their child a snake if they asked for a fish? Or a scorpion when they ask for an egg? Even horrible people give good gifts to their children, so how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Of course, we may not always understand why our requests are not good for us, why God doesn't make the boy or girl we like in high school like us back or why that job we prayed to get fell through. And we may try to get around God's decision, to try to convince Him that we can indeed handle what we ask for, like the T-shirt I saw that read: "God, let me win the lottery so I can show that it won't spoil me." But we can accept, maybe not at first but later, many times God doesn't answer our prayers the way we would like because it would not be good for us, even if we don't see why right now.

Other times, though, it's hard to understand how answering our prayers would be a bad thing, for us and for others. We pray for our loved one to recover from illness, for our marriages to be healed, for spousal abuse to end, for our children to come to their senses and come home, but our prayers go unanswered. We may never know why this is. But just because God doesn't answer our prayers like we feel He should doesn't mean that God doesn't love us. In fact, it's in instances like this perhaps that we see most clearly why prayer is not about putting coins into a vending machine, but about relationships, about our relationship with God, about our being bent towards God who is Himself bent towards us. Indeed, despite what this passage seems to suggest, Jesus never promises that God will answer all our prayers as we would want. He does, however, promise that God will be with us, the Holy Spirit will be with us even in the darkest, hardest, most painful moments of our lives.

This can sometimes feel like small comfort. Yet our God is a God who knows pain and suffering, fear and loss first hand. In Jesus God took on our life and our lot and died so that we might know that there is nowhere we can go that Christ hasn't already gone, and that there is nothing we can do -- or have done to us -- that God cannot love and forgive, redeem and save. And so, when we pray in Jesus' name, when we come before God with our hurts, our disappointments, as Jesus taught us to do, what we find is that Jesus is already there with us, suffering with us, comforting us, and assuring us all that, though it may not look like it right now, the gospel is still true, the resurrection is still to come, and God will redeem and heal even this.

Jesus has given us a great gift in giving us the Lord's Prayer. For in giving us this prayer, he has given us the gift of a relationship, of intimacy with the Father. By praying as Jesus prayed, we not only learn what to say to God, the right questions, so to speak, we also come to know God, to know Him as our Father, as the One on whom we can depend, as the One with whom we are

invited to share our needs, our wants, our hurts, as the One who promises to answer our prayers, even if not always in the way we want but always for our good. Praying to this God, using the prayer that Jesus prayed, we cannot help but be drawn into the loving relationship that Jesus has with the Father, we cannot help but find our lives bent more and more towards God, and we become more like the one who taught us to pray, more like Christ. And what greater thing could we hope for from prayer than that? Thanks be to God!