

Intimacy With God

Luke 11:1-13

July 25, 2010

I.

And now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say, "Our Father, who art in heaven. . . ." And you know the rest. Why does the Prayer Book introduce the Lord's Prayer in that way? "We are *bold* to say?" Why do we have to be bold to pray the Lord's Prayer? Does it require bravado, or fearlessness, or courage? Can't we also pray with humility?

Today's Gospel describes Jesus' teaching about prayer. And I will talk about that in a moment. But first, let's figure out this unique introduction to the Lord's Prayer. And perhaps we can set the stage by reviewing today's Old Testament reading from the Book of Genesis.

We recall that the Lord was about to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of the great wickedness of the people who lived there. But then Abraham got into an interesting discussion with the Lord about Sodom, didn't he?

Abraham did not want to believe that the Lord would destroy the righteous along with the wicked, and he asked, what if there are fifty righteous people in the city? And the Lord relented, and said, for the sake of fifty righteous, he would spare the city.

And then Abraham speculated that there might be only forty five righteous in the city. What then? The Lord agreed to spare the city for the sake of the forty five. And Abraham kept right on going, didn't he? What about forty, he said, and then thirty, and then twenty, and then ten? And each time the Lord agreed to spare the city as Abraham changed the question.

What was Abraham doing in this reading? Was he frightened and shaking in his boots as he even dared to speak to the Lord in this way? Or was he assertively questioning the Lord as a good lawyer might question a witness? Perhaps he was doing what our kids sometimes do when they push the envelope just to see how far they can go.

I believe Abraham spoke to the Lord knowing he would be heard and the Lord would respond. The Lord already had made a covenant with Abraham (Ge. 17:2), and a strong relationship between them existed. And today's reading shows how that relationship enabled Abraham to approach the Lord with confidence and assurance that he could speak the concerns of his heart.

We say the Lord's Prayer in the same way. We offer it boldly, as the Prayer Book instructs. This means that we, like Abraham, pray with confidence and assurance. And as Abraham lived into his covenant with the Lord, we know that through the New Covenant given by Jesus Christ our prayers also will be heard and answered.

II.

So let's go back and examine what Jesus said today about prayer. And his words are important because as Christians we are called to live spiritual lives in a secular world. Sincere and heartfelt prayer is at the foundation of spiritual life.

In addition, since Jesus hears our prayers and is our advocate with the Father, we might be advised to pay attention to what he said about prayer. It's like the teacher giving us the answers to the test in advance. Jesus told how to get an "A." We just have to remember it and do it.

The reading we just heard has two parts. It began with Jesus teaching the disciples what now is known as the Lord's Prayer. And the prayer we use today is closer to the version in Matthew's Gospel than Luke's. But they both are complete expressions of our relationship with God.

The prayer, however, is not a fixed formula that we automatically repeat from force of habit. Rather, it is the foundation of our recognition of God's sovereignty over our lives, and it is the framework within which our own unique praise, petitions, and thanksgivings can be offered.

In many ways the Lord's Prayer is like the Two Great Commandments. Just as our call to love God and our neighbors summarizes our Christian duty, the Lord's Prayer embraces every theological principle of Christian living that Jesus taught in the Gospels.

And preaching about Lord's Prayer reminds me of a story, which was told to me by a Catholic friend, and so I feel safe in repeating it in the spirit of good fellowship in which it was offered.

The president of Anheuser Busch Brewery was meeting with the Pope, and told him the company would make a \$10 million donation to the church if it would change Lord's Prayer and replace "Give us this day our daily bread" with "Give us this day our daily beer." The Pope, of course, said it was not possible.

But the brewery president persisted and offered \$25 million dollars." And again the Pope declined. Finally the president said, "Holy Father, here is my final offer. Change "bread" to "beer," and I will write you a check right now for \$100 million dollars." The Pope picked up a phone beside him and said, "Cardinal Mancini, how firm is our contract with Pepperidge Farm?"

The point of this story is persistence, which leads into the second part of Jesus' teaching about prayer. He also told the parable of the sleepy father who didn't want to get out of bed to get bread for his neighbor, but did so because the neighbor continued to ask.

And Jesus reinforced this by saying that if we ask we will receive, if we search we will find, and if we knock the door will be opened. These are metaphors for God's promise that our prayers will be answered. Then Jesus said we could trust in those answers because if our own earthly fathers give us good gifts, then our heavenly Father will do even more through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So, there we have the basics. Jesus gave us guidelines for prayer that places us before God. And we must keep at it. God cannot be dialed up on demand. Sometimes we leave a message. Sometimes we call back. And sometimes we wait for the Holy Spirit to lead us to form the prayers of our hearts. And our prayers will be answered with what God believes is best for us.

III.

There also is another meaning in today's reading that we should consider. God wants us to have a relationship with him, and he wants that relationship to grow. There is no time when we can sit back and say we have prayed enough. There is no finish line. Just as athletes practice and have a training discipline, we also are to have a similar discipline in our lives of prayer.

Let's think about our prayers. Do we start from the same point each time we begin to pray, or do we start from progressively new places as we move more deeply into a loving relationship with God? Do we automatically repeat the same check list of items when we pray, or do we think about prayer as a spiritual discipline that can lead to a transforming union with God?

I would like to suggest, and I think we all instinctively know, that prayer is not just something we do because we always have done it. It is not merely a box to be checked in our daily lives. The purpose of a life of prayer is not just to have pleasant experiences for ourselves, or to satisfy our consciences, but rather to become a more perfect fulfillment of the persons we were created to be.

Jesus wants us to allow him to live his life through us. Prayer is essential for this to happen. And I should mention that if we truly grow in prayer, there will be times when we feel that God

has become more distant. That is because in our spiritual growth we have reached a temporary plateau, and God is calling us to come further.

If we would make a chart of our spiritual growth, it probably would not be a straight line upwards. Rather, it would look more like stair steps where we feel elation and joy as we attain the next step, only to have it diminish as God moves ahead while we rest a while. But then we do take the next step, and we feel joy and elation again. Prayer is an essential part of that journey.

We might think back over our own spiritual journeys. God probably drew us to him in the first place with pleasant experiences. But God also knows that if we insist on always having those pleasant experiences, then we are in danger of serving ourselves or ending in idolatry.

And so the end of that initial intimacy is a sign of progress. We move from intimacy to unknowing, from presence to distance, from fullness to scarcity, and then we come intimacy again. And if during those times we continue to pray and seek the Lord, we will see how, when he appears again in full as he always does, we have grown and been transformed.

IV.

And while a discipline of prayer requires us to intentionally seek God in our hearts, we do not have to join a monastery, although some are called to that holy life. Seeking guidance in our lives through prayer and faith does not prevent us from remaining fully engaged with the world.

For example, Paul said to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). But this does not mean we always are on our knees. Prayer takes many forms. The catechism in our Book of Common Prayer says that "prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deed, with and without words," and also that it is "our response to God the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit" (BCP 856).

Let's look at that again. Prayer is responding to God through the Holy Spirit. We do it by thought and by deed, with and without words. This might explain what it means to pray without ceasing. Certainly we know we are at prayer when we pray in a formal sense. But we also can do it, if we choose, every day through our actions and the examples we set. Our lives can be our prayer.

Even so, a life of prayer requires us to be deliberate. This means that we also are called to intentionally offer the feelings of our hearts, or seek the Lord in silence, or reflect on Scripture, or partake of the Eucharist, or fast, or share with a prayer group, or do something else that purposefully enables us to live into our Christian identity.

And we also are called to worship in a community, as we do at St. Thomas. By sharing our faith with each other we participate in something that is larger than the sum of its parts. After all, the goal of personal transformation is not just to achieve a private feeling of holiness, but also to serve with others to transform the community around us. That is why our liturgy is in the plural.

V.

Billy Graham once said that "prayer is the rope that pulls God and people together. But it doesn't pull God down to us; it pulls us up to him."

And so when we pray boldly and with confidence out of our deepest needs we can trust God to know what is best for us. Through prayer we can experience God, and through prayer both ourselves and our circumstances can be changed.

The bottom line is that prayer is our pipeline to God, and if we approach our prayer lives in honest, reverent, and unselfish ways, being aware of our motives, then we can know that God hears us, that God loves us, and that he will take care of us. *Amen.*