

Pentecost 7C (7/28/2019)

Genesis 18:20-32

Psalm 138

Colossians 2:6-19

Luke 11:1-13

God is always more ready to hear than we are to pray. The promise is that when we finally bring ourselves to pray, we become present to God who is already present to us. In the end, prayer is not a wish list – no matter how legitimate the wishes – but an instance of communion with the One by whose loving care the world is always being made new.

“Almighty and ever-living God, you are always more ready to hear than we are to pray.” This confession, the first phrase in the Prayer of the Day, is a helpful preface to Jesus’ famous teaching about prayer in our Gospel from Luke today. Why else would the unnamed disciple urge him: “Lord, teach us to pray”? It’s not a polite request, but a plea. And, in anticipation of Jesus’ reply, I imagine the rest of the disciples also prick up their ears. There is a collective sense that something is lacking in their prayer life, that they have much to learn about relating to God. Does this resonate with you as much as it does with me?

Jesus’ response, of course, comprises Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, which is perhaps the most recognizable of all the elements of Christian liturgy. We pray the Lord’s Prayer, albeit a version closer to Matthew’s,¹ in unison with Christians the world around week in and week out and generation after generation. **For many of us, it flows from our mouths without much thought, serving as a sort of mantra, a reliable communal practice that opens our hearts to God.**

¹ Matthew 6:9-13.

Have you ever realized halfway through the Lord's Prayer that you haven't been paying attention to the words? Do you ever feel negligent if you haven't focused intently on their meaning? If so, take heart! **Jesus' teaching about prayer is less about the words themselves than it is about the One to whom we direct our prayer.**

When the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, they're not necessarily asking for a proper formula or technique. Rather, they're seeking to understand a relationship, a spiritual orientation. As Matt Skinner puts it, the disciples' request, "Teach us to pray," is akin to "Show us your heart" or "Tell us – what is it like to be in communion with God?"² In other words, **Jesus is an authority on prayer not because he has a way with words, but because he is distinctly qualified to make God known to us.**

And, his model prayer has a great deal to say about God. In simple phrases, Jesus directs his followers to acknowledge God's righteousness and sovereignty: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come." Then, he encourages us to bring before God our needs and the needs of the world: "Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." It's a reverent yet confident prayer, honest and unadorned, with petitions for basic necessities, forgiveness, and deliverance. And, as if this weren't enough, Jesus goes on to compare the recipient of our prayers to a friend who provides for an urgent

² "Who Taught You How to Pray?" <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5367>.

need at midnight, and a parent who gives good gifts to his children: “How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Jesus’ lesson in prayer turns out to be a lesson in theology; to pray is to confess who we believe God to be. If God is the Holy One; if God’s kingdom comes wherever light dawns on a weary world; if God knows and attends to our needs; if God is merciful, and teaches us to be merciful in turn; if God gets us through hard times; if God is a better friend, a better parent than any of us can ever hope to be, then God is certainly worthy of our earnest prayers. “Ask, and it will be given to you,” Jesus insists, “search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you.”

The question remains: **What, exactly, will be given to us; what will we find; what is behind the door?** Jesus’ encouragement to be bold in prayer has often led people of faith to overemphasize answers to prayer, that is, the value of prayer is measured according to its efficacy. *Did you get what you prayed for? If not, then there must be something wrong with your prayer.* Of course, God is not a divine vending machine, dispensing favors and blessings in proportion to the worthiness of the person pushing the buttons.³

What will be given to us, what we will find, what’s behind the door is the very One who invites us to pray in the first place. God who creates, redeems, and renews the world is the true answer to prayer; the privilege

³ Skinner, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 291.

of relating to God is in itself the purpose of prayer. Barbara Brown Taylor

cherishes this insight, which she learned from one of her spiritual guides:

Brother David [Steindl-Rast] was the first person to tell me that prayer is not the same thing as prayers. Prayers are important, he said. Saying psalms in the morning is a good way to head into the day more prayerfully. So is going to church, where I can add my voice to those of a whole congregation aiming to woo God's ears with their ancient, beautiful cadences. Still, prayer is more than saying set prayers at set times. Prayer, according to Brother David, is waking up to the presence of God no matter where I am or what I am doing. When I am fully alert to whatever or whoever is right in front of me; when I am electrically aware of the tremendous gift of being alive; when I am able to give myself wholly to the moment I am in, then I am in prayer. Prayer is happening, and it is not necessarily something that I am doing. God is happening, and I am lucky enough to know that I am in The Midst.⁴

Of course, Jesus gives us good and faithful words to speak: "Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us... Forgive us... Deliver us."⁵ But the truth remains that **God is always more ready to hear than we are to pray.** **Dear church, the promise is that when we finally bring ourselves to pray, we become present to God who is already present to us. And, even when we can't find the words, we trust that the Spirit will intercede with sighs too deep for words.**⁶ **In the end, prayer is not a wish list – no matter how legitimate the wishes – but an instance of communion with the One by whose loving care the world is always being made new.**

⁴ *An Altar in the World*, 178.

⁵ See Douglas John Hall, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 290.

⁶ Romans 8:26.