

Jesus teaches us how to pray.

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.
9th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 12, Yr. C. (Text: Luke 11:1-13)

A prayer of St. Augustine:

*Almighty God, you know our necessities before we ask, and our ignorance in asking:
Set us free from all anxious thoughts about tomorrow;
Give us contentment with Your good gifts, and strengthen our faith so that,
as we seek Your kingdom, You will not permit us to lack any good thing,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, it wasn't because prayer was something new or unknown to them. They prayed in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and every day, wherever they were, they offered prayers, in the morning, at noon and at night. They gave thanks and blessed the lord before they partook of food. They were devout Jews. However, they observed that Jesus not only prayed as they did, but also in ways that were quite different from the rabbinical model. Because they wanted to become like him, they wanted to learn to pray as Jesus prayed. We might stop right there and say that *the ultimate purpose of prayer is to make us more like Jesus.*

The disciples wanted to learn to pray as Jesus prayed, and he was eager to teach them. So he began the lesson by saying, "*when you pray, say "Father..."*" Address God as *Abba*, "Father." Telling people to talk to God the way they talked to their own, human fathers might work well for people who had an easy, relaxed, friendly relationship with their dads. But not everyone has *had* such a positive relationship. Even so, in spite of that, we can imagine what that relationship *might have been like* —what it could have been like. And that ideal is the context Jesus wanted the twelve – and wants each of us – to have in mind when we pray: a context of love, intimacy, and understanding.

There's nothing we can say to God in prayer that's going to offend him, even if we're "mad at him". Even if we're confused by him. (And all children, no matter what their fathers are like, are at some time going to be "mad at dad." Or confused. Or both.)

There's no way of getting around the fact that the root meaning of the word *pray* – in Hebrew, or Greek, or English, or any other language I know – is to ask for something. But I believe that the practice of Christian prayer includes a whole lot *more* than simply presenting requests to God. I'm convinced that the essence of prayer is *orienting ourselves intentionally to God*, putting ourselves, as best we can, directly before God, giving him our undivided attention. Such prayer need not always involve words, or even articulated thoughts. I said last week, "*Love is listening.*" If we love God, we're going to spend time just listening to God and not saying anything.

Nevertheless, our prayer is always going to involve asking God for things, too. Even if we believe that God "knows our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking," when we learn to pray as Jesus prayed, we're going to learn how to express our needs to the Father. The Bible gives us examples of some of Jesus' own prayers, and from them we can see that when Jesus communed with his father, he also made requests. In addition, we can see the *KINDS* of things Jesus asked for as well as the kinds of things he did not ask for.

In one of his *Alpha Course* talks, Nicky Gumbel tells a story about a mother who went up to sit with her 10-year old son while he said his bedtime prayers. When she came into the room, she saw that he was already kneeling beside the bed. She paused to listen and heard him praying over and over, "Please, dear God, let it be Tokyo! Let it be Tokyo."

When he'd finished his prayers, she asked, "Why were you praying, 'Let it be Tokyo'? What did that mean?" "Oh," the boy said, "We had our geography exam today and I'm pretty sure I gave a wrong answer. So I was praying that Tokyo might be the capital of France."

Prayer is not a childish way of begging God to do whatever we want. But prayer *is* what allows the power of God to be released in us so that we might follow Christ and become more like him.

Next week we'll be blessed by the presence of one of America's most effective preachers, Will Willimon. Just to give you a "foretaste of good things to come," I want to quote Bishop Willimon on the subject of learning to pray as Jesus prayed. He said,

"Prayer is not whenever I spill my guts to God: prayer is when I obey Jesus and pray for the things that he teaches me to pray for and when I pray the way he prays. Prayer is bending my feelings, my desires, my thoughts, and my yearnings toward Jesus and what He wants me to feel, desire and think.

He goes on to say, "In most churches I visit," – he is a Methodist bishop, so he visits Methodist churches – "a time of prayer is often preceded by a time of 'joys and concerns.' I notice that in every congregation, the only concerns expressed are concerns for people in the congregation who are going through various health crises. Prayer becomes what we used to refer to as 'sick call' in the army. Where on earth did we get this idea of prayer? *Not* from Jesus! He healed a few people from time to time, but he doesn't pray for that. He prays for the coming of God's kingdom, for bread (but only on a daily basis, not for a surplus) and for forgiveness for our trespasses.

"It's curious that physical deterioration has become the contemporary north American church's main concern in prayer. Jesus is most notable for teaching that we're to pray, *not* for recent gall bladder surgery, but for our enemies!

". . . A Christian is someone who is engaged in lifelong training in how to pray like Jesus. Thank God, Jesus does not leave us to our own devices when it comes to prayer. If I were praying on my own, would I pray for something as mundane as daily bread? Or that I would have the guts to acknowledge that I had actually trespassed against someone? *No!* There would be no way for me to pray faithfully in Jesus name if he weren't there every Sunday coaching me, prodding me, saying, '*When you pray, say this....*'

Bishop Willimon says, "The summit of Christian worship, the most challenging moment, is that risky, countercultural, against-our-natural-inclination moment when someone stands amid the congregation and says, '*Let us pray.*'"¹

Here endeth the lesson from Bishop Willimon.

Jesus' story about the man who goes to his neighbor's house late at night begging for bread to give an unexpected visitor is an object lesson regarding the sort of things his disciples should pray for. It's a picture of a man seeking something he needs to have, if he is to be able to obey the will of God.

In the Middle East, both then and now, hospitality is a supreme virtue. A moral imperative. If someone arrived in a Judean home as a guest – whether invited or not – the householder was morally-bound to provide food and shelter and every other necessity.

In this parable, the householder has no food to set before an unexpected guest, so he goes to his friend next door and knocks on his door until the neighbor wakes up and answers. If the surprised host is to fulfill his obligation of hospitality, he *must* have this neighbor's help. Our translation says he wants "three loaves of bread." (That actually meant something like three medium tortillas, which was regarded as the minimum adequate meal for one person.)

The man will not give up knocking and asking until his reluctant friend finally gets up from his bed and gives him what he wants. The host is bold, shameless and annoying in his persistence, but he has a God-given duty to provide food for the wayfarer, and he is not going to give up on it. If he is to do that duty, he needs help from his neighbor. The neighbor is his only hope.

In this little story Jesus teaches us that when we lack something we need to have in order to be able to do God's will, then we must ask God for it. We have to pray for it. We have to pray and keep on praying – to "ask and keep on asking, to knock and keep on knocking" – until our prayer is answered. Our *request* itself makes clear that we know God's will and want to do it. And our *persistence* demonstrates the depth of our confidence in God's promise to provide what we need.

Asking God for something in faith does not so much mean we trust the accuracy of our precise assessment of what we need to have if we are to be able to do God's will ("three loaves, no more, no less"), as it does that we trust our Father's eagerness to provide everything that will equip us to follow Jesus and grow daily in his likeness.

Join me in prayer.

Father, loving Father, we come to you asking for a supply of those things that will enable us to fulfill your will. Give us what we need to feed the hungry. Give us what we need to shelter the homeless. Give us what we need to provide for the sick, and the suffering, and the lonely. Give us these things, O Lord, and then send us forth to be obedient. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ William H. Willimon, in "Bloggging toward Sunday." *Theolog: the Blog of The Christian Century*. July 23, 2007. http://theolog.org/2007/07/bloggging-toward-sunday_23.html