

Sermon, Proper 12, 17th Sunday after Pentecost, July 28, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

‘[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."' (Luke 13:1)

Prayer can seem so mysterious, can't it? As much as I seem to be drawn to contemplative modes of prayer, I can never be sure if what I am doing is actually prayer—much less be able to describe what is happening. And it would be hubris to claim that I am doing anything. Thankfully, as Paul assures us in Romans, "... the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." (Romans 8:26) I am grateful to the unnamed disciple who asks Jesus to teach the disciples how to pray. It is always so wonderful when someone else asks the question we are burning to ask!

It may seem futile to try to describe prayer. Still, it can be useful to let our imaginations lead us into a place of wonder. Once I described prayer as opening an invisible door and walking through. A wise teacher I knew said that to pray is "...to enter a reality that is always here within us and beside us, available to us as an invisible stream into which we can step at any time. [It] is not so much something we do, but is a state of consciousness which we enter which brings us

into communion with the Living Presence.” (Bill Taber, *Four Doors to Meeting for Worship*)

Back in the seventies I became intrigued by the existence of black holes through the popular science books of Stephen Hawking. A black hole occurs when the density of matter is so compact that its gravitational pull prevents light from escaping. It is only possible to discern the presence of a black hole by what is nearby such as radiation or X-rays emitted by orbiting bodies. The black hole, as a kind of “Cloud of Unknowing,” has become a metaphor for me in my understanding of the contemplative approach to God through prayer. One is unable to discern the light, yet light is still there in concentrated form. Scientists tell us the center of every galaxy has a black hole including the Milky Way. In my imagination, at the center of the Trinity is also a black hole with its powerful and inexorable gravitational pull that draws us into the life of God.

We find Jesus in prayer throughout the Gospel of Luke: on mountains, in boats, and in gardens. Jesus models a way of life that is immersed in prayer. It is not surprising the disciples long to know what Jesus is actually doing! Jesus teaching on prayer is beautifully simple and concrete. I wonder if the disciples were surprised at first? I would like to think that they were relieved to be offered something so practical. The Lord’s Prayer, as we have come to call it, seems to

acknowledge that we are human beings with limitations, and with basic needs—daily needs. It is a prayer that many of us learn first as children, and may be the last we forget. We pray it when we gather, before going to sleep, and when no other words will come to mind.

The version we hear in Luke is quite spare, yet contains most of the familiar elements. First Jesus says, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.” (Luke 13:2) So much is communicated in that first word: “Father.” Jesus wants his disciples—wants us—to know God as he knows God. God is a loving parent; God is someone we can approach in trust. No matter how old we may become we are children of God. Yet we must always acknowledge that God is the Holy One. We cannot do anything on our own to make ourselves holy. We approach God in an aspect of humility. Jesus models this for us, as Paul tells us in Philippians 2: “...He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death... Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name...” Even if, “Father, hallowed be your name” is as far as one gets in prayer, think what a wonderful place that is: the very presence of God.

Then Jesus says the disciples are to pray, “Give us each day our daily bread.” (Luke 13:3) Human beings are in need of food every day. While elsewhere in Scripture Jesus tells us not to worry about what we will eat or wear, reminding us life is more than food, and the body more than clothing (Matthew 6:25-34), God

is aware that physical sustenance is a fundamental need. When the Israelites were led through the desert by God, they were fed with manna. It could not be hoarded, and lasted for just one day. These days of food in cans, frozen boxes, and lining the aisles of grocery stores, it is easy to lose sight of the daily necessity of this prayer. God wants us to remember that, as in the wilderness, we rely on God alone. The need for bread and the need for God are daily needs. We cannot consume either all at once.

Frederick Buechner created a lovely book called *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith*. Under 'L' for "Lord's Prayer," Buechner suggests we have to bold to pray all parts of this prayer. He sums up the second half of the prayer like this: "Give us. Forgive us. Don't test us. Deliver us. If it takes guts to face the omnipotence that is God's, it takes perhaps no less to face the impotence that is ours. We can do nothing without God. We can have nothing without God. Without God we are nothing." This is no cause for despair, but of joy. God is with us: Emanuel.

Finally, Jesus tells the disciples to pray, "...Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." Having my sins or my debts forgiven has special meaning for me as I know what it is to be burdened by financial debt. In connection with my recovery I sought the sacrament of reconciliation. The priest does not do the forgiving, Jesus does that.

Yet to hear the words spoken aloud, “Your sins have been put away,” gave me a sense of physical relief: my shoulders felt lighter. Forgiveness is release. We turn to God for that release, and that very release makes it easier to turn to God. It is not some spiritual *quid pro quo*. God is always ready to be merciful. We are meant to behave likewise. I think of the refrain of the folk song “Pack Up Your Sorrows” by Mimi and Richard Fariña:

Well, if somehow
You could pack up your sorrows,
And give them all to me.

You would lose them,
I know how to use them,
Give them all to me.

Acknowledging that God is our loving parent, the source of our holiness, our daily sustenance, and the merciful one who forgives is what keeps us from the “time of trial.” This part of Jesus’ prayer for us is not separate from the other elements. A “time of trial” is when faith is tested. However, I do not believe our lives are supposed to be some impossible Olympian contest. Life is not always easy and so, perhaps inevitably, it comes to all of us, maybe more times than we think we can bear. I am comforted and reassured that Jesus tells us to pray that we not be brought to it. St. Teresa of Avila wrote a wonderful prayer that speaks to this hope. It is sometimes known as the “bookmark prayer”:

“Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
All things are passing;
God only is changeless.
Patience gains all things.
Who has God wants nothing.
God alone suffices.”