

Shameless Prayer

Prayer was a central part of Jesus' life, even right up until the moment of his death. So much so that everyone seemed to notice it. All the gospel writers mention moments when Jesus went off to pray. It's interesting because he usually went off by himself, so for the most part they didn't know the substance of his prayers, and yet they all find it integral to his story to mention that Jesus took time off alone to pray. It was so compelling, so inspiring, maybe so mysterious, that his disciples finally just ask him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

In response he gave them the template that we know as the Lord's Prayer, and there is no service in our prayer book in which it fails to appear or is even optional. In it, he teaches us how to pray and what it is that we really need – sustenance, mercy, protection, daily bread, forgiveness, and to be steered away from test and tribulations that we are not strong enough to bear. But before any of that is asked for, he teaches us to get into the proper frame of mind – that we are coming as dependents, and God's will is to be sought first and foremost.

Rowan Williams says about the opening to the Lord's Prayer - "[It] begins with a vision of a world that is transparent to God: 'May your kingdom come, your will be done; may what you (God) want shine through in this world and shape the kind of world it is going to be.' And only when we have begun with that affirmation, that imagining of a world in which God's light is coming through, only then do we start asking for what we need." Because it is only then that we can know what we truly need within the framework of what we were created for. In a remarkable few lines it frames how we are to see the world, how we are called to relate to God, and what the core needs of our lives really are.

It is wonderful and beautiful, and instructive, and yet even Jesus knew that on its own that wasn't enough instruction for his followers, so he doesn't stop there. The truth is, prayer is meant to be an active conversation, but sometimes when we pray it feels as though we are met with silence that ends the dialogue and we are just left pleading. Jesus acknowledges this in the little story he tells to follow up.

Imagine you have already gone to bed. It's midnight, the house is locked up, the lights are out, the dog is kenneled, the kids are sound asleep, and you are in your pjs under the warm covers. And then someone starts banging on your door. They need to borrow food because their house guests arrived late and they have nothing to feed them. In the ancient world where hospitality was a virtue above almost all others, that would have been a breach of honor, more than just a social faux pas. You don't want to do anything, certainly not get out of bed and get them some food from the pantry, but they just keep yelling up to you, past the point of annoying and to the moment of real disturbance, and you know that if you don't get up and give them something, then they will continue on until the whole house is awake. So you get up and give your neighbor something. Jesus says that when you pray, you're the beggar at the door, don't give up until you get an answer. The word used in our translation is persistence, but it carries the connotation of shamelessness, the type born from utter desperation.

This is how Jesus encourages us to pray, with a persistence that borders on shamelessness. Why? Because it puts us in a posture of vulnerability that opens us up to a relationship. No meaningful relationship can be built on demanding from a place of entitlement or a sense of superiority. True and deep relationships are built when you drop all posturing and self-sufficiency and acknowledge that you need the other person, that you are lacking without them, that your fullness, your joy, depends not on what you can provide yourself but on the connection to the other. This realization of vulnerability that leads to relationship is what Jesus is pointing us to in the little story. Seek and you will find, ask and you will receive, knock and the door will be opened to you- and then you can come in and you will meet face-to-face with what you really need, a loving God ready to embrace and care for you.

George Buttrick, who was a well-regarded pastor and seminary professor in the last century, once said. "If God is in some deep and eternal sense like Jesus, friendship with him is our first concern, best resource, and sublimest joy." That is what we are being encouraged to form here – a deep relationship akin to the friends who you could call up in the middle of the night because you needed something at that moment, and know that they will open their door and give you all they have. A friend who you know that when you screw up and ask for forgiveness, and the relationship will be made stronger because of it. The type of partner who would do anything to save you from the time of trial, because they don't want to see you struggle. That is the relationship that Jesus wants us to form in prayer, and I think it is why, when so many people were constantly making demands on him, he would go off alone to pray, because he needed to be reminded of that primary relationship he had with the Father, so that he was not truly alone.

Sometimes you meet a person who you know has that sort of relationship with God, and it always comes with a deep and meaningful prayer practice. Occasionally I have seen it when I have gone to visit someone on an Alzheimer's unit, and though memories have slipped away, whole human relationships have fallen into the abyss, they can still remember the Lord's Prayer, calling it up from somewhere deep inside of them, right at the very core. I think it is because for those people it was conduit to a deeper relationship than all others. It was the foundational one, and it cannot be lost. In their shameless desperation it is the one thing they can still cling to. That is how Jesus is hoping we will be formed by this prayer, and it is why we practice it in every service, teach it to every child, and model our own our prayer on it – because of a deep trust that it will connect us to God who is a friend like no other.

I want to say one last thing about prayer. I don't consider myself a great prayer. Sometimes I think of myself as more of a doer, so I can prioritize accomplishing things over sitting and praying. I am glad to be in a tradition that give me set prayers and prayer times as an aid and a guide. I do like to keep the church intercessions list from the bulletin in my office and pray for those folks on it every day. But sometimes I find myself too busy to pray. I get to the end of the day and a number of things have come up, and gotten in the way, and eaten up time, and I realize I have forgotten to lift up the names on the list. I try not to beat myself up about it, thinking to myself some excuse like, it was all some sort of important church work that got in the way, and shrug it off in a way that is probably shameless but not in the persistent sense of the word. But here is the truth I know: Praying is not the opposite of doing; it is the source of doing – it guides what we do and why we do it, and it is almost always a mistake to be too busy to pray.

As I was thinking about that this week I was reminded of an old Nike poster I saw one time that said, "Someone busier than you is running right now." The premise being, everyone is busy, but if exercise is really important to you then you make time for it. The same is true of prayer. Busier people than me, more important people than me, find time to pray. I need to as well, and I need to do it persistently, and I would suggest, so do you. Jesus was busy, being interrupted all the time by people breaking in with important requests, and yet he was continually making time to go off alone and pray. It is probably what kept him going and made him centered, and that centeredness is what disciples envied most about him. Maybe that is why the gospel writers all took note of the habit enough to make sure it was part of the story. Maybe that is why the disciples ask him to teach them to pray, and what we should still learn from him. Amen