

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

4 – Marks of the 21st Century Church – Formed By Prayer

Ephesians 3:13-21

Luke 6:12-13, 11:1-13

September 12, 2010

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It is amazing what one will do for a friend. When we come to learn from Jesus how to pray, as the disciples asked that day, and as we ask in varied ways throughout our lives, Jesus speaks to us as a friend who is closer than a brother and invites us to pray to God as we would speak to a good loving caring father. Prayer is utterly foundational for the Church of the 21st Century and for every single person who breathes. In fact, prayer is a lot like breathing. It is that essential.

Learning to pray we enter into a friendship with God through Jesus Christ that is intimate, personal and ongoing. We figuratively link our hands with God's and live life no longer on our own but in partnership with the divine. We speak in the Church of the means of grace, as the ways we normally encounter God and engage with God. Scripture and sacraments are two of the means. So also is prayer. In fact prayer is even more foundational. Prayer is the chief means of grace.

Prayer is that central. Everett Fullam observed that in teaching the disciples to pray, "Jesus wasn't setting forth another liturgical incantation. He was setting forth a way of life."ⁱ Prayer is a way of life. P.T. Forsythe said, "Prayer is to religion what original research is to science."ⁱⁱ John Calvin, in his masterful section on Prayer in the Institutes, said, "Words fail to explain how necessary prayer is and in how many ways the exercise of prayer is profitable. In short, it is by prayer that we call upon God to reveal himself as wholly present to us."ⁱⁱⁱ And Richard Foster, who has written so powerfully about Spiritual Disciplines, said,

"Prayer catapults us onto the frontier of the spiritual life. Of all the Spiritual Disciplines prayer is the most central because it ushers us into perpetual communion with the Father. It is the discipline of prayer that brings us into the deepest and highest work of the human spirit. Real prayer is life-creating and life-changing."^{iv}

Throughout his life, Jesus is centered in prayer. Through prayer he combats the Devil during forty days of temptation in the wilderness. Through prayer he gains strength to teach and heal across the hills and valleys of Galilee. Through prayer all night long he discerns who to call as his disciples, "He went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them."^v Through prayer he was strengthened to embrace his cross. Through prayer he spoke his last words from that cross. "Into thy hands, commit my spirit."

As the disciples are traveling around with him they notice how regularly and naturally Jesus prays. For him prayer is more essential than sleep. These disciples know they need what he has. So one of them asks, “Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples.” Jesus is certainly not the first person in the Bible to pray or to teach prayer. John the Baptist had taught his disciples. Throughout the Old Testament Abraham and Jacob, and Moses, Sarah, Rachel, Hannah all and David and Solomon pray fervently. The Book of Psalms, which John Calvin called, “An anatomy of all parts of the soul,”^{vi} is the quintessential prayer book of all times. The 150 Psalms are still our best prayer guide. Jesus had these psalms on his lips throughout his life up to his last words from the cross. He stands in a long line of faithful Jews who lift their hearts to God in prayer. And the disciples want and need what he has. “Lord, teach us to pray.”

So Jesus teaches them this model prayer we universally term “The Lord’s Prayer. In a few short phrases he shows us how to address God intimately as our Father, ask for God’s name to be honored, and for God’s new Kingdom to become manifest in everyday life. Three phrases focusing upon God as Father and God’s rule and reign. Then three phrases about us and our needs, for God to provide us with daily bread – which includes - food, shelter, work, good weather, to forgive our sins that most foundational gift of grace, or to experience evil. Something we are praying about this weekend over the 9th anniversary of the horrific 9-11 terrorist attack. Luke’s prayer is shorter than Matthews, but the same essential pattern. This prayer offers us a specific comprehensive diagram for our life of prayer. Like diagramming a sentence- this pattern helps us.

But Jesus does not stop with a diagram. He gets personal. He goes on from these six petitions to giving an earthy example from everyday Galilean life, an approach he undertakes frequently. He would take these ordinary situations about hidden treasure, good soil, sick children or stormy weather, and show God at work within them. Just suppose one of you has this friend next door and in the middle of the night you go to him because suddenly another friend has surprised you at your house, arriving hungry, tired, in need of food and shelter.

Because of the need of your friend you go out of your way to meet them. You bundle up and hurry next door to this other friend, now fast asleep, and bang on his door demanding some bread to put out for your recently arrived friend. Your sleeping friend is a good fellow. You share each other’s tools and lawn mowers. You have occasional barbeques together. When you are out of town your friend is good enough to mow your yard, and you his when he is out. Sometimes he comes over and puts water out for your dog. He is a good neighbor. He is a good friend. Friends do these sorts of things for friends. But at midnight? The extent of your friendship is being tested. You’d normally never even consider banging on his door so late. Yet because he is your friend, and your other friend has a need, off you go. Bang. Bang. Bang.

His welcome is not exactly overwhelming. “Do not bother me. Can’t you see we’re down for the night: the door is locked, the children are snuggled in their beds, with visions of sugar plums dancing in their heads, and I can’t get up and do anything for

you?” Yet because your other friend’s need is so great you keep banging. You keep pleading. You feel a strange energy flowing through you that enables you to keep at it. Finally, because you stick with it and do not back down, your neighbor and friend gets up and provides you with what you need.

Jesus says, you pray to God like that. I’ve given you the model now you take it and run with it boldly. Ask, seek, and knock. Keep at it persistently and you will discover, what you ask for will be given, what you are looking for you will find, and the door you thought was closed will be opened. This is Jesus’ essential teaching on prayer. Practice this and your life will change.

I

In order to learn to pray like this, we must first develop an **attitude** like Jesus. We must come to God in prayer out of our deep need. We must come honestly. We must come humbly. We must come to God in prayer because we cannot make it through this thing called life on our own. We discover our limits and know we need help from beyond ourselves.

We may have seen some of those studies that have been done in hospitals with coronary patients where one group was prayed for and another group was not and statistically the group that was prayed for was healed more fully and had more effective results getting over their illnesses than those who were not. Although if I’d been in the unsprayed for test group, I might sue for malpractice. Other studies have shown that people who pray and go to church regularly, live longer than people who don’t. There has been some empirical verification of the effectiveness of prayer.

Yet we also know other instances where we or those we love have prayed fervently and not received the healing we requested, did not get the answers we wanted. Yes I believe prayer works. But it is not a matter of magical healing. Sometimes healing comes in ways we would never choose. Prayer is a matter of attitude alignment.

Karl Barth, in the last lectures he gave before he died, spoke on prayer. He said, “God is not deaf but listens; more than that, he acts. God does not act in the same way whether we pray or not. Prayer exerts an influence upon God’s action, even upon his existence. This is what the word ‘answer’ means.”^{vii} During their wilderness wanderings, God changed his mind about the disaster that he was planning to bring to the Hebrews for their idolatry in making the golden calf because Moses boldly prayed to God. Moses prayed. God changed his mind.

Still God allows car wrecks and sickness. God allowed the Holocaust. Disasters continue and lives are lost in ways we do not understand. C.S. Lewis, in reflecting upon his wife Joy Davidson whose cancer for a time went into remission but later claimed her life, responded to a friend who had said, “Hey I see why you pray. Your prayer worked. Lewis answered, “That is not the point at all. I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I’m helpless, because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn’t change things. It changes me.” Learning to pray begins with developing an

attitude like that of Jesus, aware of God as our caring heavenly Father who provides good things for his children.

II

Prayer must go on secondly to be **active**. We must actively and intentionally take time to pray. We must make prayer a priority in our lives. We do not leave it willy-nilly to some fringe, if we get around to it. Some of you have been around Rev. Jim Truesdell, who has taught us a lot about prayer. He is a person of deep prayer. You have heard his cell phone alarm go off, Westminster Chimes reminding him it is time for him to pray. There is value in such scheduled prayer in the midst of your day. You do not have to be legalistic about it. But such a reminder can help you put into practice what in your heart you want to do. You need to pray regularly in church. But not only here. God can hear you from anywhere, in the car, at the grocery store, in your office or school.

The example Jesus offers, of these neighbors at midnight, shows us the boldness and the persistence with which we must approach the Lord of the universe who has numbered the hairs of our heads. He will respond to our heartfelt and persistent prayers. My grandmother was a deeply spiritual woman. She prayed daily for her other grandson, my cousin, who had many problems growing up. She wrote him a hand-written letter daily during the worst of them, which included a prison term. Her prayers, and actions based upon her prayers, had a powerful effect on him.

We need to pray actively - boldly and persistently, expecting God to act. We need to pray within God's will. But to pray within God's will does not mean we constantly interject a half-hearted "if it be thy will," which normally means we really are not expecting much, and so will not be surprised if nothing happens. Jesus never prayed like that. Yes he prayed, "Thy will be done," especially that last night at Gethsemane where he sweat great drops of blood. Yet he prayed from his own human perspective fervently that the cup might pass, "if it be possible let this cup pass from me," that there might be another way for the healing of the world. God's answer took Jesus directly through the cross, even as he prayed boldly for another way. Meaningful prayer is active not passive, persistent not peripheral, demanding not to half-hearted unafraid to argue with or stand up to God. Such praying enables the Holy Spirit to act.

III

Prayer as taught by Jesus involves our attitude. It is active and intentional. Finally, in response to our experience of prayer to God our Father, we leave the prayer full of hope. We go out believing we have been heard, and trusting that God will answer the prayer according to his purposes and ways. With John in his first letter we trust – "This is the confidence we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him." ^{viii}We go from prayer with a heart enlarged until it is capable of containing God's gift of himself, as Mother Teresa said.

I have walked with some of you sitting here. Many people who have faced deep darkness and loss. And I have been amazed at the tenacity and courage with which you have moved through your experience of darkness and loss, strengthened through prayer. At one particularly tragic death a minister said at the open graveside, “I do not know why things like this happen, but it is because things like this happen that Christ died and was raised and is alongside.” It is because terrible things happen, and darkness and finally death comes to each of us, that Jesus stands alongside as our closest friend. “What a friend we have in Jesus.”

And so dear friends, let’s do that! Take it to the Lord in prayer. Take time to pray. Pray with an attitude of honesty and expectation, like Jesus. Pray actively - persistently and boldly, with awareness that God hears and answers prayer even when that answer is not what we want or expect. Then rise from your prayer full of hope - believing God has heard and answered you. Place your hand in the hand of Jesus and relax. He is praying with you and he is your Lord and Savior and advocate and your friend.

Good and gracious Father, teach us to pray, and praying find our rest and our resolution and our reason for being in you – this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

ⁱ Bill Carl, The Lord’s Prayer for Today, p.4.

ⁱⁱ Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline, quoting P.T. Forsythe, p.38.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 3, Vol. 2, p.851.

^{iv} Richard Foster, *ibid.* p. 33.

^v Acts

^{vi} Eugene Peterson, Working the Angles, quoting John Calvin.

^{vii} Karl Barth, Prayer, p.13.

^{viii} 1 John 5:14, 15