

Malcolm Clemens Young  
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA W30  
9 Pentecost (Proper 12C) 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist  
Sunday 24 July 2016

Gen. 18:20-32  
Ps. 138  
Col. 2:6-15 (16-19)  
Lk. 11:1-13

### **Teach Us to Pray**

*Jesus was praying in a certain place, and... one of his disciples asked him, 'Lord teach us to pray'' (Lk. 11).*

During vacation this summer on the island of Maui I was walking to church for the 7:00 a.m. Eucharist. My wife's cousin Woozer was driving downhill toward the beach with a surfboard in his car. He stopped, one thing led to another and before I knew it we were surfing Ho'okipa together. As we came in I asked him, "You are a surf coach what suggestions do you have for me; how can I get better?"

At a deep level we hunger for learning. When someone excels at something that we care about, we ask that person how we might improve. The disciples see prayer at the center of everything Jesus does. Jesus prays alone in the desert, and in the midst of large crowds at the sea. In prayer he begins his public ministry. He prays as he heals people, chooses disciples and shares meals with them. He prays on ordinary days and as he dies. It is almost as if he is no longer praying but has himself become the prayer.

The disciples recognize prayer as the basis for his extraordinary peace and wisdom. They want this for themselves and say, "teach us to pray." In response Jesus gives them two very different things. He provides them first with a model for how they should say their own prayers and then with help in forming the disposition or the heart for prayer.

1. We live in a time of contradictions. Globally the number of Christians keeps expanding. At the same time old Christian institutions in Western Europe and America are shrinking. Almost everywhere religions that would in the past have nothing to do with each other are now rubbing up against each other and learning new vocabularies for the spiritual life.

These days we have begun to realize that prayer is good for us. Twenty years I felt mildly embarrassed when other people would learn that I had a meditation practice. Today most people I meet recognize that mindfulness, centering prayer, forms of breathing prayer and yoga reduce stress and lead to overall better health.<sup>1</sup>

Before going much further I need to be clear on the importance of prayer in my life. I pray at regular times of day, before meals and at bedtime. I pray for people and the world. I have a meditation practice which involves quietly repeating passages written by great saints. I say a kind of mantra repeating the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us"). My most frequent prayer though arises from my heart as spontaneous appreciation for all the blessings of this life – for the natural world, the beauty of this great city and her people.

You might have asked yourself the question, "Does prayer work?" And my answer is an emphatic "Yes!" Prayer has shifted my whole disposition. It has put joy at the center

of my life as I grow to feel more and more like a child of God. Prayer continues to fundamentally change my relationships with other people.

We call Jesus' model for prayer the Lord's Prayer. Although I visit evangelical churches where they do not say the Lord's Prayer, here at Grace Cathedral we repeat the prayer together at every public worship service. The version Christians use most often comes from the Gospel of Matthew. In today's gospel from Luke Jesus gives us an even simpler version of the prayer.

My friend the biblical scholar Herman Waetjen has written a whole book on this subject. He believes that we misuse the prayer, that it becomes meaningless through mindless repetition. He admires a prayer inspired by the Lord's Prayer in the New Zealand prayer book. It goes like this:

"Eternal Spirit! / Earthmaker, Painbearer, Lifegiver, / Source of all that is and that shall be, / Father and Mother of us all, / Loving God in whom is heaven: / The hallowing of your name echo through the universe! / The way of justice be followed by the peoples of the earth! / Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!"

"Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth. / With the bread we need for today, feed us / In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us. / In times of temptation and test, strengthen us. / From trials too great to endure, spare us. / From the grip of all that is evil, free us. / For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever. Amen.<sup>2</sup>

This week for homework try praying the Lord's Prayer in your own words. Keep in mind that the word that Jesus uses for father (abba) is intimate like daddy. The prayer addresses God's hallowedness or holiness and we might think about how this becomes real for us. What do we depend on as our daily bread (is it coffee)? When we ask for God's kingdom to come what does this mean?

This might be a great opportunity for us to really think about temptations to deviate from the path of goodness. It gives rise to the question of how forgiveness can set us free from being enslaved to the past.

For me the precise words of the Lord's Prayer have not devolved into meaninglessness through repetition. As I have said many times, there is far more to us than our conscious or rational thought. These words are among the last I say every night and they may be the last words I ever say. I have been with people near death whose minds were wasted with dementia. This prayer was the only thing they could say, all that was left.

2. Unfortunately, having the most perfect form is not enough for prayer to help. Prayer requires a particular attitude of the heart, a kind of disposition toward God. What we think about the one to whom we pray matters.

Distrust has always been a fundamental feature of the human condition. Each of us in our past has trusted people. Each of us has been disappointed by them. But even beyond our individual experiences, the zeitgeist, the spirit of the modern age involves a kind of extreme cynicism. We are jaded. We don't believe what we hear. We question the media,

and educators. We distrust authorities and their motives. We believe we are being lied to even when we are not. So much of what we call news is the story of distrust. And all this has an influence on our spiritual life.

Distrust was the defining characteristic of the snake in the Garden of Eden. The one who tempted Adam and Eve did not doubt the existence of God. He raised the question of whether God would act in the best interests of human beings. We are still doing this. We worry about being duped. We do not trust God in part because we think we know better than God. It reminds me of the old one liner, "The difference between God and you is that God doesn't think he's you."

Jesus tells the story about a man going to his neighbor for bread. Even if the neighbor won't help for the sake of generosity, he will do it so that you will stop yelling in the middle of the night. Jesus' point is that we need to persist in prayer, not that God will only answer our prayers to shut us up. When our children ask for a fish we do not give them a snake, or a scorpion instead of an egg. We know what is good for our children and God who loves us knows what is good for us. God answers our prayers so that anyone who seeks will receive the Holy Spirit.

People with experience in praying have asked God for what turned out to be the wrong thing. We have had our later prayers answered by having our earlier prayers refused. We have been surprised and had our deepest longings satisfied by God in completely unexpected ways.

In the fourth century St. Augustine wrote about the inner struggle each of us faces as we decide whether we are going to trust God or ourselves.<sup>3</sup> As Augustine came into manhood his mother Monica saw how tempted he was by sensuality and the paganism of his father and the greater Roman Empire. He wanted to be a great scholar, famous for his speeches, to study with the greatest minds in the world.

Monica believed so deeply that the only way for him to become a Christian would be for him to stay near her in North Africa. Monica prayed that he would stay. In fact she was praying in a chapel at the very moment that Augustine left North Africa. She thought she had lost her son, that God had not heard her prayer.

It happened that in Milan one of Augustine's pagan teachers told him he should go to hear the sermons of Bishop Ambrose, not for their content but for the genius of their structure and expression. At that time Ambrose had perhaps the best education of any Christian and was deeply respected by intellectuals. Of everyone in the world Ambrose was the one person who had the best chance of reaching Augustine's questioning heart. And he did.

Until that encounter Augustine writes, "I was not yet in love, but I loved the idea of love... I was starved for inner food (for you yourself my God)."<sup>4</sup> After this encounter he came to know the peace of Jesus. His teaching has shaped nearly every Christian's experience of God since then.

The point of the story is that we have such deep longings for something more than the merely ordinary. We have ideas about how these desires might be satisfied but ultimately we have to trust God.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond our questions about how prayer works and how we ought to pray, beyond the struggles of our ego, beyond even the tragedies and joys of our life, we face a question. Are we going to live as if goodness and love lie at the heart of reality. But even beyond this, we encounter the living God who promises that when we ask for the Holy Spirit we will receive it.

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Dossey, *Prayer Is Good Medicine: How to Reap the Healing Benefits of Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> I have read that Jim Cotter of the Church of England wrote this prayer. It appears in the "Night Prayers" section of: *A New Zealand Prayer Book* (He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa), The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia (Christchurch: Genesis Publications, 1989), 180-1.  
<http://anglicanprayerbook.nz>

<sup>3</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 71-2. John R. Claypool uses this story in "To Whom Do We Pray?" *Day1* 25 July 2004. [http://day1.org/454-to\\_whom\\_do\\_we\\_pray](http://day1.org/454-to_whom_do_we_pray)

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* tr. Rex Warner (NY: Signet Classic, 2001), 38.

<sup>5</sup> These are the last days of my first year here and I have been praying a great deal. Sometimes I simply cannot believe that God gave me both such a deep desire to serve as a priest and teacher, and the perfect opportunity to exercise this ministry here.