

Learning to Pray

There's something intimidating about preaching on the topic of prayer. It's so big a topic, and so important, and I always feel like a beginner. I read, and re-read, my favorite sources on prayer. I pray, and pray again, and still feel like I should be better at this. So it's reassuring to read that Jesus' first disciples also felt like beginners at prayer. "Lord, teach us to pray," they asked. I think we all can identify with their request.

Prayer is a nearly universal human activity. Whether our prayer is orderly and refined or basic and from-the-gut, it is almost instinctual to reach beyond ourselves in times of need, as well as gasp in awe in times of joy. Presbyterian professor Howard Rice observes that "all prayer arises from the human sense of the transcendent, some power beyond what can be seen or touched." (1991, *Reformed Spirituality*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, p. 71) When I teach children and youth how to form their prayers into words, I use Anne Lamott's formulation: help, thanks, and wow. What do we need God's help with? Ask it. What do we want to thank God for? Say it. What makes us stop what we're doing and just feel the sensation of "Wow, God!" Try to put it into words. We all experience these starting places for prayer. Keep it simple, advises Lamott. Her outlook on prayer makes for a good riddle: "What's the difference between you and God?" Give up? "God never thinks he's you." (2012, *Help Thanks Wow*, Riverhead Books, NY, pp. 35-36) Prayer is the attitude which keeps us in our place.

But if prayer is so simple, why is it so hard? Those first disciples were raised in Jewish culture, where prayer was built into the daily routine. If you've ever observed Muslims at prayer, you'll have a sense of what that might have been like. Five times a day, at prescribed times set by the position of the sun, faithful Muslims stop whatever they are doing in order to pray. It's impressive. And Jews in the first century knew a similar sort of cultural training and expectation. Yet still, they wanted to know more. "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

So Jesus complied. The prayer he gave his disciples, as given to us by Luke, is the bare bones version of the prayer we commonly call the Lord's Prayer. His prayer was not some sort of innovation, a new way to be in communion with God. It was a Jewish prayer. He chose elements of common prayers known and regularly voiced by Jews, and put them together. When Matthew wrote his gospel, four additional phrases were included. And a few centuries later, the church added, "for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." So because the Bible tells us that Jesus said, "When you pray, say this," some form of this prayer is said in nearly every Christian church every time the community worships.

We do it by rote, from memory. Most of the time, I am sure, most of us are not thinking about every word or phrase. But if you are contemplating "give us this day our daily bread," and your neighbor on the right is pondering "hallowed be thy name," and your neighbor on the left is thinking about "forgive us our sins" while your neighbor in front of you is considering "as we forgive those who sin against us" and the one behind you is stuck on "your kingdom come," then together we are praying the entire prayer with integrity and sincerity. And if all the world's Christians are faithfully praying this same prayer in their own languages, then we are indeed obeying our Lord's instructions on how we should pray. It is good to have a formula for our prayer, something we can all say together.

So in our learned prayer, we address God personally.

Our Father. God is not the clockmaker who set everything in motion and now sits back to watch. Nor is God some metaphysical force. We are intimately related to God, we are children of God.

Hallowed, or holy, is your name. When we speak with God, we do so with respect and awe.

Your kingdom come. May all that you promise be fulfilled, may all on earth bow to your rule, may justice and peace and truth prevail.

Give us this day our daily bread. Like the Hebrew people in the desert, we rely on God for what we need. And in this prayer, we are also asking God to help us distinguish between our needs and our desires, trusting that enough will be enough for everyone.

And forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone indebted to us. Which comes first, being forgiven or being forgiving? It's a chicken and egg situation. But forgiveness is at the heart of living Christ's way.

And do not bring us to the time of trial. This last petition in Luke's version of Jesus' prayer is the most puzzling in its various translations. But think of it as a request for God's help to stay away from evil and always choose what is good.

And that's it, the bare bones version of the Lord's Prayer. Adoration and petitions to set us in right relationship with God and one another, to live the life we've been given with the right attitude, making the right choices. We pray to be the persons, and the people, Christ calls us to be. We pray to be in communion with our triune God.

But still, why does prayer seem so hard? A recent article in the magazine *The Christian Century* offers an answer. (see "Forming a People Who Pray," Andrew Root, *The Christian Century*, July 3, 2019, pp. 20-23) Prayer is hard because we are immersed in a secular age which limits our ability to see what was once obvious: a personal God who acts and moves in the world. We are focused on what we've been told is most important—measurable things, material things, accomplishments and failures, bank accounts and Twitter followers and church budgets. So we have difficulty perceiving the presence of God active in the world.

There's an analogy from the world of cognitive psychology. Maybe you've heard about or seen the "Invisible Gorilla" video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo> A psychologist at the University of Illinois was interested in how people filter what they are seeing in order to pay attention to what seems important. He set up a visual test. Six people, three in white shirts and three in black shirts, pass two basketballs to those on their teams as they move around in a small circle. Observers are instructed to count how many times the white-shirted team passes the basketball. During this little game, an unexpected visitor enters the circle. It is a person in a gorilla suit, who thumps his chest and then walks out the other side. But the surprising thing is that 50% of those watching the basketball toss game do not see the gorilla. They weren't looking for a gorilla, they were counting basketball tosses as they were told to do. But when the video is replayed, there he is, just as obvious as can be.

It is hard to see God, to truly believe in God's presence, when our focus is elsewhere. That's what makes it hard to pray, even when we want to believe. Yet prayer broadens our attention on the world around us, making us look for God's arrival, like an unexpected person in a gorilla suit. It takes prayer to cultivate our attention to God's aliveness in the world. People who immerse themselves in a life of prayer begin to see God everywhere, to feel God's presence, even to hear God's voice. The aim and goal of Christian prayer is to experience God, on earth as it is in heaven. When Soviet cosmonaut

Yuri Gagarin returned from space, he announced that he had not seen God there. A Russian Orthodox priest responded, "If you haven't seen him on earth, you will never see him in heaven." (Kenneth Leech, 1980, *True Prayer*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, p. 11)

Writer Kenneth Leech observes, "To pray is to make the most of our moments of perception, and this means giving time, approaching time in a new way. There is no need to rush around feverishly looking for a prayer life: we need to slow down and look deeply within." (p. 10). He quotes poet William Blake.

Unless the eye catch fire
 The God will not be seen.
Unless the ear catch fire
 The God will not be heard.
Unless the tongue catch fire
 The God will not be named.
Unless the heart catch fire
 The God will not be loved.
Unless the mind catch fire
 The God will not be known.

How can our senses, and our very selves, catch the fire of God with us? Lord, teach us to pray!

Dear ones, Jesus teaches us because prayer is life, prayer is God, prayer is relationship, prayer is love.

May we pray with our whole selves, in response to God's love in Jesus Christ.