
What to Pray For

A sermon by Canon Todd Smelser
Proper 12 – Year C

How do you pray? Who taught you how to pray? What do you pray for? I must admit that I have very few memories about prayer when I was young. My parents were great people, but not churchgoers, so I wasn't baptized as a baby. In fact I wasn't baptized until I was a first year seminarian. I think we usually had a prayer before dinner at my grandmother's house on Thanksgiving and Christmas, but that was about it. When I was in the fourth grade, I did start going to church—the local Methodist church on Seminary Street, the same street that I lived on. (Providential?) I still have a picture of Mrs. Montgomery's fifth grade Sunday School class. She had the boys, while another teacher taught the girls, kind of like orthodox synagogue or mosque worship today. I saw several of that class at my recent high school reunion. I know that we learned the Lord's Prayer that year, and maybe a few others, but all of that is pretty vague now. But soon, I was studying the organ with Mrs. Miles and by the seventh grade was playing the organ for church services. I liked those services of prayer and music and readings. The pastor's sermons were a bit boring, but he was really a great guy, and that made up for it.

It's now been a long time since I first learned those rudimentary prayers. Now, after serving the Episcopal Church for 42 years of ordained ministry, I find I'm returning to the basics, and the beauty of our prayers in our Book of Common Prayer. To be honest, praying has not always been very easy for me. The corporate prayer that we share every Sunday morning and during the week has certainly shaped and strengthened my own spiritual life. My daily prayers have sometimes been hit and miss, although when one of you asks me to pray for something, I take that very seriously. Maybe the most important thing in my prayer life has been the prayers of the folks like you who sit in the pews every Sunday. Your faithfulness and persistence encourage me to be more attentive in my prayers. I like Thomas Merton's words about all of this when he spoke of prayer as the communion of our freedom with God's ultimate freedom. But it is Anne Lamott, who said it the best. She said there are two basic prayers: "Thank you, thank you." and "Help me, help me, help me."

Today's Gospel reading takes us back to the beginning of praying with and in Jesus Christ, and its more than just a story about how we got the Lord's Prayer. Jesus taught his disciples how to pray and for what to pray. We know that prayer was an integral part of Jesus' spiritual life. Luke says that Jesus prayed in desert places, and on the mountain top. He prayed before he chose his disciples and when he fed the 5000. He prayed the night before he died and from the cross itself. Prayer was part of his life, even unto death.

So when Jesus responded to the request of his followers that he teach them how to pray, what he taught them was important not just for them but for the whole church. Jesus begins, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed by thy name; your kingdom come.'" We are to approach God as Father, Abba, one we relate to intimately. Jesus' prayer reminds us that there is one who has power over all and yet is near to each of us. This prayer invites God to take charge of life, our lives, and to bring about justice and peace to our world.

The remaining petitions concern three basic needs: food, forgiveness and fidelity. These requests name what is essential for the life of each of us as well as the community of faith we are part of, be it the church of the world. These are the gifts of the kingdom, which will not be refused because they flow from our being united with the very being of God, who sustains, forgives, and is faithful to us.

Jesus ends this prayer session with a parable, a little story and some advice urging persistence. Commentator John Pilch suggests that a better translation for this word should be "shamelessness" In a world where hospitality was highly prized, the continuous shameless knocking would broadcast to the world the shameless behavior of a friend who stays in bed rather than answer hospitality's urgent need. So keep on asking, searching and knocking—be equally shameless in your prayer. Think about God as a sleepy friend who needs to be shaken awake by a shameless friend who really does need something.

This morning we have the opportunity to give thanks to those folks in our lives who taught us to pray and what to pray for—a parent or teacher, a pastor or friend—maybe even a fellow church member. And we can always take comfort from the fact that, even when we do not know how to pray as we ought, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness with sighs too deep for words.

Last Sunday's Gospel about Mary and Martha reminds us that the spiritual life contains both active and contemplative aspects. The Christian mandate is always to feed the hungry and cloth the naked, to visit those in need, for we are the hands of Christ in the world, bringing both hospitality and compassion to God's children in need. But we are also reminded that we are sustained for ministry only through the strength and God gives to us, and that often begins on our knees in prayer, listening for the still small voice. We are also encouraged to be persistent in our prayers, for God's will for us is always good.

In the midst of despair over the conditions of terror and harm and killing in our world, it is important to remember that as Christians we are always people of hope and of resurrection. It is also comforting to remember that millions of the faithful are praying every minute of the day: "Your kingdom come, your will be done." That is a prayer that has the power to unite us all.