

Being Prayers

A sermon in the 2020 Lenten Worship Series *"Watch and Pray"*

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- Romans 8:26-27 (Good News Translation) ²⁶In the same way the Spirit also comes to help us, weak as we are. For we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express. ²⁷And God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought of the Spirit is; because the Spirit pleads with God on behalf of his people and in accordance with his will.
- Luke 11:1-4 (Good News Translation) ¹One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." ²Jesus said to them, "When you pray, say this: 'Father: May your holy name be honored; may your Kingdom come. ³Give us day by day the food we need. ⁴Forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone who does us wrong. And do not bring us to hard testing.'"
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: We become pray-ers – in constant, trusting communication with God – by inviting and embracing the Holy Spirit touching our head and heart.

Our Lenten season this year gets its inspiration from an incident that took place in the Garden of Gethsemane just hours before Jesus was arrested, stood trial and was crucified. In the quiet, secluded Garden of Gethsemane the gospels describe Jesus asking his disciples to "keep watch and pray" while he moved away from them a bit for a time of private, intense prayer.

Imagine prayer time so intense that you have to step away for a while to rest, to regroup, to settle your heart and clear your mind. That's what Jesus did, several times. And each time when he returned to where he had left Peter, James and John, he found them not keeping watch and praying. No, they were snoozing – the result of the late hour and the food and wine they had consumed earlier that evening at what we now call the Last Supper.

Now, would *we* have done better than the disciples? I don't think so. *Can* we grow in our ability to "keep watch and pray"? I invite you to embrace that goal during this year's Lenten worship series entitled "Watch and Pray."

A good starting point in exploring prayer is with a prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer (known to our Catholic friends as the "Our Father"). The nucleus of the Lord's Prayer comes from the Bible. The version we know is a conflation of the slightly different versions found in the sixth chapter of Matthew and the eleventh chapter of Luke which we heard this morning. I call those versions the "nucleus" of the Lord's Prayer because neither includes the concluding praise of God's kingdom, power and glory that is familiar to us; that doxology was added to the end of the prayer sometime later.

You might be surprised to realize that this isn't a Christian prayer. Yes, it appears in the Christian scriptures, but who uttered it? Jesus... a Jew. Who requested the prayer? A disciple who was Jewish. When you look at the text (go ahead, look at the back page of the bulletin) does it contain anything that couldn't be prayed by someone of another faith tradition? No. No wonder this simple prayer has been spoken across the centuries by Christians the world over in languages too numerous to count.

Luke's gospel presents it as Jesus' response to a request from one of his disciples: "*Teach us to pray.*" That's what a disciple said to Jesus, adding that, after all, John the Baptist had given a prayer to his followers. Indeed, "It was not unusual for rabbis to teach specific prayers"¹ to their people. Is that what the disciple had in mind? Or did the disciples really not know how to pray? Had they not prayed before? Why would Jesus' disciples ask to be taught to pray?

¹ Fred B. Craddock, Interpretation: Luke. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990, p. 153.

A couple possibilities come to mind. First, maybe they didn't have much exposure to prayer. We all know that there are Christians like you who are actively engaged in a faith community, and then there are people who consider themselves Christian but do little to engage with the life and traditions of the community of faith. Surely that was also the case in the Judaism of Jesus' day: some people were active in the life of the synagogue. Others, while not deliberately violating Jewish traditions and practices, didn't go out of their way to observe them either. Maybe some of Jesus' disciples hadn't been particularly devout practicing Jews, and prayer wasn't a regular part of their lives.

Or, maybe the disciples were accustomed to prayer rituals that never changed, and now they were seeing Jesus engage in prayer in a way unfamiliar to them. In the Judaism of Jesus' day the worship practices were prescribed and familiar by repetition. Jewish worship consisted of four primary elements:

- 1) The twice-daily recitation of several verses from Deuteronomy Chapter 4, "4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Jews call that passage the Shema – Hebrew for the imperative verb "Hear!"
- 2) Jewish worship also included set of blessings recited before and after the Shema;
- 3) Then of 18 blessings called "The Prayer" was recited several times daily, and
- 4) The Hebrew Scriptures were read aloud in installments.²

If the disciples were accustomed to the same prayers being said the same way at most synagogue services, they may have been puzzled or fascinated by how Jesus prayed in a way that seemed "off-the-cuff," improvised. He varied his prayers depending on the situation he found himself in. Maybe that's what they wanted to learn from him: how one could engage with God through prayer in a way that was immediate, informal, and attuned to the situation at hand or what was on one's mind.

Perhaps they asked Jesus to teach them to pray because they wondered if there was a certain technique they should use: should they sit or kneel or stand or move? Should eyes be closed or open, and if open, should they gaze downward or upward? Should hands be clasped or open, held close or outstretched? The Old Testament gives examples of all of that: Solomon spread out his hands toward Heaven (1 Kings 8:22). Miriam danced – along with all the other Israelite women (Exodus 15:20)! Abraham threw himself flat on the ground to pray (Genesis 17:3).³

The New Testament, too, depicts a variety of postures and acts while praying:

- a man seeking healing knelt as he prayed (Mark 1:40);
- a tax collector pounded on his breast in remorse while praying (Lk. 18:13);
- Jesus himself prayed while bent over (John 8:6) or while raising his head toward the skies (John 17:1) or while throwing himself to the ground (Matt. 26:38), and in many settings we can presume that he was probably just standing around or sitting or even walking as he prayed.

The fact that the Bible describes a variety of postures and actions suggests to me that how we engage our bodies as we pray is not what's important. Jesus didn't prescribe a specific technique for praying.

Luke's gospel states that Jesus said to the disciples, "When you pray, say this...." Did he mean that those are the exact words to say? That's unlikely, since Jesus himself prayed saying lots of different things.

One of our ancestors in the faith was Martin Luther – yes, the same Luther whose questioning of church authority resulted in the movement known as the Protestant Reformation. Luther considered prayer a priority in his daily life: the story goes that Luther said one day that he had so much to do that day that he'd better pray for three *extra* hours. (He's also reported to have cautioned that people who don't make prayer a priority in their lives should be set in the street and pelted with horse manure.)⁴

² The formative period of Jewish prayer was that of the Tannaim, the sages whose oral traditions of law and legend are gathered in the Mishnah (edited c. 200 C.E.) and some early collections of midrash. From their traditions, later committed to writing, we learn that the generation of rabbis active at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.) gave Jewish prayer its structure and, in outline form at least, its contents.... To what extent were the Tannaim inventing the liturgical formulas and patterns they prescribed and to what extent were they standardizing and canonizing various local customs that preceded them? This question is still the subject of scholarly debate.

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/history-of-jewish-prayer/> accessed 3/4/2020

³ Michel le Gribble-Dates, "The Word Became Flesh: Movement as Prayer." *Presbyterian Outlook*, Vol. 200, No. 1, Jan. 8, 2018, p. 21.

⁴ Gary Neal Hansen, "Pray Like a Reformer," *Presbyterian Outlook*, Vol. 200, No. 1, January 8, 2018, p. 13

While Christians had been reciting the words of the Lord's Prayer for centuries, Luther believed that the individual petitions that make up the Lord's Prayer actually serve as a framework for us to explore prayer possibilities more deeply:

- So for instance, when you pray "Thy kingdom come," you might reflect on how your own priorities sometimes push God to the perimeter of your life.
- Or when you pray "Give us this day our daily bread," your prayers might embrace impoverished people elsewhere or in our country who can't afford to feed their families, or you might pray for people who suffer from eating disorders.

Another way the Lord's Prayer can teach us to pray is by trying to get past its familiarity in order to reveal new depth and inspiration. For instance, I came across an interpretation of the Lord's Prayer prepared by the Church of New Zealand that invites us to hear Jesus with new ears. Listen.

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, 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 echoes through the universe!

The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world! 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.⁵

Perhaps you'll find it refreshing or insightful to pray using texts that *aren't* familiar to you.

But here's a word of grace about communing with God through prayer: the effectiveness of our prayers is not up to us. God is not dependent on our ability to pray. God graces us with the gift of spiritual union through the experience of prayer. God does that through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In his letter to the Romans St. Paul says that our vocabulary or imagery or vocal resonance or posture or gesture are not what's required for a life of prayer. All that's needed is a willingness to be open to God's Spirit drawing us near. From Romans Chapter 8:

²⁶In the same way the Spirit also comes to help us, weak as we are. For we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express. ²⁷And God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought of the Spirit is; because the Spirit pleads with God on behalf of [God's] people and in accordance with [God's] will.

"Without the Spirit, we are simply at a loss to know how to communicate with God."⁶ But by God's gift of the Holy Spirit we can trust God

- to know our feelings,
- to know what we're thinking,
- to know what worries us,
- to know what's filling us to near-bursting with joy.

We can trust God

- to speak through the Holy Spirit,
- to reassure through the Holy Spirit,
- to counsel and console through the Holy Spirit,
- to give strength and guidance through the power of the Holy Spirit.

So when we follow the example of the disciple who said, "Lord, teach us to pray," we are praying to be open and receptive and attuned to God's Holy Spirit who speaks, as St. Paul put it, "in groans that words cannot express."⁷ Becoming pray-ers is not our accomplishment; we become pray-ers by being open to God's Holy Spirit knowing us and leading us to know God.

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⁵ Church of the Province of New Zealand, *A New Zealand Prayer Book*. Auckland: William Collins Publishers Ltd., 1989. The text may be projected onto screens and spoken in unison. © www.worshipdesignstudio.com 21

⁶ Paul Achtemeier, *Interpretation: Romans*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985, p. 143

⁷ Romans 8:26 Good News Translation