

## De-Mystifying Prayer

As a pastor I've had many conversations with folks, including some of you, in which someone has expressed how awkward they feel when they're expected to pray out loud in front of other people. Suddenly something that ought to be simple and natural seems very unnatural and complicated.

There's something that changes when we think that someone else—besides God—might be listening in when we pray. This reminds me of a conversation I had the other day with Clea—the young woman whose been playing the piano for us some Sundays while Crystal has been on her baby-break. Clea has just begun taking organ lessons, and she had asked if she could come in and practice in our sanctuary. When I peeked in to say hi, she asked me whether her practicing was bothering anyone. And that led me to share about my own discomfort with having people listen in when I'm practicing the cello.

Now to be honest, there's a lot about serious practicing that isn't very pretty. When I'm finding my way into a new piece of music there's always a lot spade work to be done—working our fingering and bowings, and so on. And then there's what musicians call “woodshedding” – working the hard parts over and over until you, hopefully, master them. I always find that I'm very self-

conscious when I think that someone is listening in to my not-ready-for-an-audience work.

When it comes to praying, even in private, our models are more often than not the public prayers of others who have had a lot of practice. And in many cases their prayers have been carefully written. So when we return home to our prayer closets—we're still left with a nagging worry that we're somehow not doing it right.

There's undoubtedly something like this in the background of the disciple's request that Jesus teach them how to pray. In daily practice, Jews in Jesus' time used some common set prayers, but different rabbis also had prayers they taught to their pupils. And so the disciples naturally want their rabbi, Jesus, to do the same.

But there may also be some bigger questions behind this. As Paul says in the Romans reading "we do not know how to pray as we ought." More than worrying about saying the right words, we wonder about whether we're praying for the right things to begin with, or we wonder why does it seem like God doesn't always answer our prayers. It can all seem like a big mystery.

In this collection of sayings Jesus teaches three lessons that help us demystify prayer.

He begins with a version of the prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer. We're much more familiar with the version found in Matthew, and by comparison this one feels like a stripped-down, "Reader's Digest" version – for

those of us who are old enough to still know what the “Reader’s Digest” is. We may gravitate to Matthew’s version because of its well-rounded phrases and rhythms. But this bare-bones version may let us see it not as a prayer to be repeated, but as a model of the topics we might want to pray about. Each line is a starting point—something that we can flesh out in our own words.

It begins with the big picture. When call God “our Father” we are acknowledging that this God we pray to is a Person (with a capital P) – not just a force out there but a person with whom we are in relationship as child to parent, as creature to Creator. As we “hallow” God’s name we are recognizing the Lord’s holiness and power and glory. When we pray, “Your kingdom come,” we are aligning our own wills with God’s will. And this also opens the door for us to pray for the world—for God’s redeeming power and love to enter into all those places where his rule is not being recognized.

It’s really only then that the prayer focuses on our personal needs—as we acknowledge our dependence on God, beginning with our most basic needs, remembering that no matter how much food we have in the cupboard and how much money we have in the bank that it all comes from him. And it opens the door to ask him to meet our needs and the needs of others.

The next topic is reconciliation. As we pray for forgiveness of our own sins against God and our neighbors, we recognize our own need to be reconciled with others. It underscores just how important those relationships are—how much

pain and suffering come from relationships that are broken—and as we ask for them to be healed, and acknowledge our responsibility to seek that healing.

The last line, “Lead us not into temptation” or “[D]o not bring us to the time of trial,” may be the most mystifying. We know that God isn’t out there trying to trip us up. As James says in his letter, “No one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God,’” for God “tempts no one. But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it.” (James 1:3-4) The point is not that we will never be tempted or tested, but that we recognize that we need God’s strength to be faithful when trials and temptations come our way.

If that’s Jesus’ answer to the question, “What should I pray for?” he goes on to use a couple of colorful illustrations to answer the question, “How can I know that God will answer my prayers?”

He tells a story about a man who shows up at his neighbor’s door in the middle of the night looking for some bread. Guests have just arrived from out of town and he needs to feed them. The man inside the house grumbles about how inconvenient it is, but in the end he gets up and helps him anyhow.

The key line in the story turns out to be notoriously hard to translate and interpret. The most literal way to read it is, “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his shamelessness he will get up and give him whatever he needs.” My best stab at understanding this is that Jesus is saying that although that man in the house is reluctant to help his neighbor, he does the right thing because his friend wasn’t

embarrassed to ask. But we know that God isn't a reluctant giver – God loves us and delights in coming to our aid. So we should never be embarrassed to ask!

So this isn't really about persistence if that means we think we need to nag God into helping us. Jesus' point is that because we know God we can trust him, and so we shouldn't lose heart if he seems to be slow to answer us.

The second illustration paints the comical picture of child asking a parent for a fish, and the parent giving them a snake instead. Or the child asking for an egg and getting a scorpion. Jesus point is that even an ordinary sinful parent gives good things to her children—so we can certainly expect God to give us good things when we ask him.

These illustrations don't answer every question we might have about prayer. We may still wonder why we don't receive everything we pray for.

I've never thought and struggled with this as much as I have since Lorri's cancer diagnosis. I know that some types of cancer are tougher to fight than others, and that many people have prayed faithfully and persistently for their loved ones and they have still succumbed to the disease. And there's no reason to think that Lorri or I are any more special to God than any of those other people.

I don't pretend to know why some people get major life-changing or life-ending illnesses, while others seem to sail through unscathed. But I don't believe that God "gives" people cancer, much less that it's some form of personal

judgment, or so that it happens so that some higher mysterious purpose can be accomplished. But I do believe that God listens when we pray and that he only gives good gifts to his children.

And so I don't pray for a miracle—in the sense that Lorri will suddenly wake up one day completely cured. I guess you can compare my way of praying to praying for our daily bread. I pray that wherever this journey may lead that the Lord will provide what Lorri needs to meet the current challenges in front of her one day and one step at a time, and I pray for myself for the grace to walk along with her. And so far, I believe that he's answered those prayers. Lorri has passed safely through some dangerous times. The treatments have worked as well as or better than expected. But also don't know what the next day, or week, or month or year will bring. But I know that the Lord is listening.

I also find encouragement in Paul's words. I didn't quote the whole thing back at the beginning. The full sentence reads, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." When I don't know what to pray for, I trust that the Spirit is holding my hand—asking the Father for the best and right things on my behalf.

I said earlier that in this passage Jesus de-mystifies prayer. That doesn't mean that we can fully understand the ways and purposes and timing of God—but we can know that his ways and purposes for us are good. We can be free

of anxiety that we have to somehow say the right words or pray in the right place or pray in the right posture or feel certain feelings.

Just “ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”

Amen.

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