

“Teach Us To Pray”
Genesis 18:20–32; Luke 11:1–13
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I want to begin with the sophisticated theology of Huckleberry Finn (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain, p. 11).

Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for, I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fishline, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work. By and by, one day, I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out no way. I set down one time back in the woods, and had a long think about it. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuffbox that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to myself, there ain't nothing in it.

Such is the thinking of Huck Finn and the reason why many people give up on prayer. Whether they pray for something frivolous — my New Testament Professor Alan Culpepper prayed as a little boy that when he woke up, his dresser drawer would be full of fish — or something significant — like for a dying loved one to get well or peace in Ukraine — many people think of prayer as some kind of transaction with the Almighty, a way of manipulating God into giving us what we want.

And to be fair, there are religious teachers who promote this view. It's just a matter of saying the right words in the right way and we get what we want. It may even seem that Jesus agrees, as in our reading from Luke 11, he says, “Ask, and it will be given you...”

But Jesus says a lot more about prayer than this. And the problem with this view is not only that it doesn't work — our loved ones still die and war rages in Ukraine — but that this thinking confuses God with Santa Claus. In his classic work on comparative religion and mythology *The Golden Bough* Scottish anthropologist Sir James Frazer contended that the difference between magic and religion is that magic seeks to manipulate God while religion seeks to serve God. In prayer, we open our lives to God's influence as opposed to trying to change the Divine.

Prayer lies at the center of our faith. When asked what the most central practices of Christian faith are, we list prayer, but we could benefit from a deeper understanding of what it is. Our reading from Luke begins with the statement that Jesus is praying, and when he finishes, his disciples say, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." They know prayer is important, Jesus' prayer life is compelling, and they want to experience something like it. Jesus provides an example of prayer and then offers several brief teachings about it, and in the process, he tells us what we need to know.

One thing Jesus tells his disciples and us is that prayer involves a relationship of trust. It is not some kind of transaction. It is an intensely personal endeavor. In the passage from Matthew 6 we read every Ash Wednesday, Jesus says this: "Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they might be seen by others... whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:5-6)." What would Jesus make of showy public prayers in our time?

It doesn't mean there is no place for prayer in worship space like this, not all prayer has to be private, but it does push us to ask questions about our motivations and how we understand prayer. It is essentially an intensely personal way of relating to and speaking with our Creator.

In today's reading, this is signaled by the intimate way of referring to God as "Father." My theology professor Frank Tupper used to say that while Jesus did refer often to God as Father, his image was of a motherly Father, a parent figure who embodied the best of both genders. The central message

here is that Jesus speaks of relating to God as a parent, not some abstract entity or distant judge.

It is not the most common image in Jewish faith nor is it a natural way of thinking about God for Luke's Gentile readers for whom "father" was a complicated image. In Greco-Roman culture, fathers had complete control over children. They decided if a newborn child would be raised by the family, sold or killed. Jesus is talking about a God who is sovereign over all things, but much more nurturing than this, more caring, One who is approachable, One we can trust.

The petition for daily bread is evidence of this trust. It echoes God's provision for the Israelites in the wilderness. They received manna daily, just enough for the day, but because they could trust God with their lives, they didn't need to have more than a day's needs met. Jesus' model of prayer includes a request for such daily provision, and in the process, it expresses deep and abiding trust in God to provide what we need, not necessarily everything we want, but what we need.

Jesus says that prayer is first and foremost a personal way of relating to a God we can trust, an ideal Parent, Father, Mother, Friend.

Another thing Jesus tells his disciples and us is that prayer requires honesty and persistence. A friend asking for bread in the middle of the night might be refused at first, but not in the end, if he is persistent. So, ask, search and knock, Jesus says, seek what we need and we will find it.

The fact that prayer is not a transaction does not mean that we should not be honest about what we think we need. A mentor of mine said that the first two rules of healthy working relationships are — 1) say what you think, and 2) ask for what you need. Others will not always agree with us and we don't get what we want all the time, but healthy relationships begin with honesty. This is true of our relationship with God. In fact, honesty may be what God wants most from us.

In our reading from Genesis 18, Abraham presents a wonderful example of honesty and persistence. When God tells him how sinful Sodom and Gomorrah are, indicating that judgment is about to come, Abraham pushes back and wonders if God might save the city if fifty righteous people are found. The request may seem impertinent, but God agrees. Eventually, after

a series of exchanges, Abraham convinces God to spare the city if just ten righteous people can be found.

The city is ultimately destroyed, apparently because ten righteous people can't be found — we don't know for sure, nor do we know what their sin is, it is not named in the text. But Abraham changes God's mind. He dares to disagree with God, to argue, to debate, because he thinks the city needs another chance; he does so repeatedly, persistently; and God not only doesn't punish him, God welcomes his honesty.

Furthermore, Abraham is not the only character in the Hebrew Bible who displays such boldness. In Exodus 32, Moses convinces God not to destroy the Israelites. The psalmist often complains about being abandoned or betrayed by God. And Job is brutally honest about the unfairness of his suffering, which in the text seems indisputable. In all of these cases, honesty is a virtue, even when it feels uncomfortable. The person contending with God does not always get what he/she wants, but the honesty and persistence lead to something good.

I have shared with some of you a passage from Henri Nouwen's diary in the last year of his life, published posthumously with the title *Sabbatical Year* (pp, 5-6). He talks about how empty his prayer life has become, how he feels nothing when he prays, hears nothing, senses nothing from God as he has in the past. It is helpful to know that even the greatest saints hit dead spots on the journey.

But just past this revelation, Nouwen offers further insight. "Maybe this darkness and dryness is the result of my overactivity," he writes, "(but) the real questions are, 'What are the darkness and dryness about? What do they call me to?'" Nouwen references Jesus' struggles, crying out to God in the Garden of Gethsemane for a way other than the cross, but bringing new life through suffering. "Are the darkness and dryness of my prayer signs of God's absence," he asks, "or are they signs of a presence deeper and wider than my senses can contain? Is the death of my prayer the end of my intimacy with God or the beginning of a new communion, beyond words, emotions, and bodily sensations?"

Nouwen's honesty in probing the depths of his struggle leads to a renewal of faith. Persistence is rewarded, as Jesus says. Sometimes when we don't feel like praying, we need to pray anyway. When we don't know what

to say, we don't have to say anything, we can listen or just be. Winnie-the-Pooh said, "Sometimes I sits and thinks, and sometimes I just sits." Sometimes we just need to sit.

So, Jesus tells his disciples and us that prayer involves a relationship of trust and that it requires honesty and persistence. And then, he tells us it isn't all about us.

The Lord's Prayer, in Luke and Matthew's versions, begins with an intimate address to God as Father, and then it offers a word of praise for God — hallowed be your name — and a petition for God's kingdom. The word of praise echoes a form of Jewish daily prayer, the Amidah blessing. The prayer for God's realm expresses Jesus' central calling.

Neither expression is about us. It's about God, honoring God, seeking God. And it's about God's ways of justice and love shaping all of life. It is because of this latter reality that Brian McLaren has said that to pray the Lord's Prayer, as we do each week, is a radical act. It is calling for a different way of ordering life. The faithful who pray for God's realm do not give in to division or spread lies, embrace the violence and materialism of our culture, or go along with the devaluing of certain children of God because of their gender, identity, ethnicity, nationality, physical or emotional limitations. The faithful pray for and seek God's ways which are not the ways of this world.

And while we don't always get what we want, this means that God doesn't always get what God wants, at least not immediately. Does God want war in Ukraine? Does God want the gun violence of this land? Does God want millions of children to starve to death while others live in luxury? God's realm has not yet come on earth as it is in heaven. We and Huckleberry Finn are not the only ones who know disappointment.

But in prayer, we discover that we are not alone, we broaden our view of what matters most, and we open our lives to God's mercy and strength. At the very end of our reading from Luke, Jesus says something that is easy to miss. He says to those who ask, God will give something or Someone — the Holy Spirit. Prayer offers no guarantees except for this — God will give us God's self. In the end, that is enough.