

Prayer 101

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“Eternal spirit of the living Christ, I know not how to ask or what to say, I only know my need as deep as life and only you can teach me how to pray.”

I just want to start by saying that it's so wonderful to have people in our music world who tie our scripture and our music together week in and week out. It is an amazing gift that most of my clergy friends say they don't experience in their life. That is the hymn we just read and that is what I'd like to speak with you about today, prayer.

Whenever we send out surveys in the church and ask the question of what you would like us to talk about? What themes or things are on your heart, inevitably what we get back is we need more learning about prayer. We need more forums, tell us more books to read, give us the answers to how to pray. There are volumes of books out there telling us just how to pray. Here are just a few titles that I love. *Prayer, Finding the Heart's True Home; The Power of Simple Prayer: How To Talk With God About Everything; Understanding the Purpose and Power of Prayer: Earthly License for Heavenly Interference.* One of my personal favorites, *Ten Prayers God Always Says Yes To: Divine Answers to Life's Most Difficult Problems.* Right, if we just get the right book, we'll have it all down. We'll just read it, we'll ask God for what we need and then Kaboom, and it's there. If only. Most of us are here because we do believe in God and we too are looking for a connection. And many of us come searching for clear ways to make that link to the Holy. I'm not standing up here to say that I've got it all figured out, heck, I own half those books on my own bookshelf. I'm still looking for the right and good way to pray to God.

So Jesus, in this morning's Gospel lesson, is giving his own version of prayer 101. After seeing Jesus praying, one of the disciples says, “Lord teach us to pray.” And the disciples, just like the people today, all of us, were seeking to learn how to connect, how to pray. So this longing for a concise how-to is not a new concept. Jesus, good teacher that He was, then goes on to offer us the words to pray that have famously become known as the The Lord's Prayer or Our Father. So often Jesus is not directive in His teachings, but in this instance He's clear. Say these words. Father, Hallowed be your name, Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread and forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us and do not bring us to the time of trial.

I remember learning the Lord's Prayer in my kindergarten class, back when we were allowed to pray at school. And we said it every day and before I even knew what the words meant I knew how to say them. This prayer is often a prayer of comfort in our worship life. We say it every week; it's the most familiar prayer. But it's also the most basic and the most intimate prayer. With these words Jesus invites us, like Him, into relationship with God, our Father. And in the Greek text, the word Abba is used which is

not translated “father” but translated “papa” or “daddy.” It’s a very intimate word, not a formal stand-offish word. It’s an invitation into relationship, into closeness. And in this prayer we ask for basic needs to be met. That we may be forgiven of our sins and have bread and food and that we too will be redeemed and saved from a time of trial. It’s a clear petitioning prayer asking for God to be with us and naming God as the Almighty we’re called to trust and acknowledge as hallowed or holy.

So Jesus in this teaching gives the disciples and gives us a starting point for our prayer life. And throughout the gospel of Luke we see prayer as this constant in Jesus’ life and in the disciples’ life. Luke uses prayer more than any of the other gospels. He holds this up as the way of life that these people are seeking to be connected with God. So then, as we ponder this lesson and prayer for a few minutes, what exactly is it and why is it so important?

So, the why. We pray for that connection, for that link that we’re longing for. And when we pray something happens when we make the connection. I’d love to say that I’ve had a rich disciplined prayer life my whole life and then went to seminary and it got deeper and richer, and then I graduated and I got ordained and I continued to have a deeper and richer prayer life, and the truth of the matter is that it wasn’t until I had my daughter and was terrified of being a parent and oh my goodness, what am I going to do, that I discovered every day, disciplined prayer. And we do this with our child every night at bedtime and sometimes it works really well and other times not so much. But at the end of the day its how we end and we end with the words of Our Father. And the discipline, over time, she’s two now, so over time has changed me. And what’s it given to me and that routine is a different perspective. It changes the way I meet the day, the way I meet the stranger. It helps me have more gratitude when often it would be easier to be stuck in the things that are troubling me. Oftentimes when we go on mission trips or are working with people of need, I’m struck by the deep prayer life that these people have and they seem so positive. And I think there is so much that hasn’t been good for you, how do you have this positive, positive perspective. And so often what you hear is that it is God and the prayers that I ask each day. And the gratitude comes from my prayer life.

I had the distinct pleasure, when I first started out in Youth Ministry, of getting sent to a conference and again loading up your bookshelves looking for the answers, I was going to a conference looking for the great answers on how to be the perfect Youth Minister. I got there and there were forums and conferences and things to go to, but the person leading the conference said, “I just want to say, whatever you do, whatever you learn this weekend, know that if you’re not building your program on prayer it’s for nothing. You have to be grounded in a relationship with God. That’s why we do it.” And here in our own life I want to name two things. In my field, education, I had a wonderful person I worked for and we both would show up for the 8am service at ten of eight and we’d tear into the building and throw on our vestments and run into worship. Here we were told when we first started that we had to be here at 7am and I thought, but church doesn’t start until 7:45 and I don’t have to be at that service. But that’s what the tradition has been in our life. We gather at 7am and we pray together before we start our day. And once I got over having to be here at 7am, I fell in love with that practice and that exercise because it

makes us start our day of worship together differently. We also have, here at Trinity, something known as the prayer team. This is a group of people and any of you can call in any time and tell us things that you would like us to pray for publicly in our prayers, but also privately. And on our private prayer list there is a team of about twelve people who pray every day through that prayer list. And when we met to talk about that experience, what was so eye-opening was you think about this great ministry that they are giving to the church, what they said over and over was "it's amazing what this ministry gives to me and to my prayer life." And how much richer their connection is with God in this discipline of prayer. So why is for the connection.

But then the question is how? Because I haven't found the perfect answer in all those books. But here's what I've come to. There's always a sense of needing to be eloquent. Have you ever been asked to pray before a meal and you panic and you think oh no, what am I going to say, I won't say it right, I don't have a book in front of me. I think that is something inherent in all of us that if we are to pray out loud, we want to do it well. I think even when we pray quietly to God we want to say the right things and use perfect words and isn't the Book of Common Prayer so eloquent as Thomas Cranmer wrote beautiful prayers that we say in our life here. But over time I think what's come to me is God wants us to pray and God's not concerned about the perfect words, but the sincere words, the words from our heart of what's really there. Not necessarily praise and glory and love, but really struggle and concern and confusion that God is there and will open the door in that. Not necessarily fix but open the door in that.

So we pray and we are asked to pray from the heart and we are asked to consistent in our prayer. In the how there is a consistent piece of its 21 days to form a habit. If we can give ourselves 21 days of I'm going to say a prayer maybe we can form a habit and a discipline. But maybe you feel like when you pray, and I've often felt this, that we are supposed to pray for two hours or for thirty minutes or we are supposed to pray on our knees with our hands clasped and our eyes closed and our minds should not wander at all. Maybe that's the kind of prayer you think you're supposed to do to do good prayer. Again, it's more about the act of trying it out that it is about doing it perfectly. Annie Lamott in *Traveling Mercies*, one of her earlier books, says, "You know some days when I get out of bed the best I can do is thank you, thank you, thank you and help me, help me, help me." That's a great place to start. And if you have one minute, give it one minute. Maribeth Conroy, at a women's prayer group, talked about how you can hit your snooze button and between your snoozes you can pray in the morning and get some extra time, that counts. Maribeth said so. Today's lesson is Jesus saying you have to start and here are some simple words to get you going. And so today's lesson to me is an invitation, an invitation to just do it as Nike has beaten into our brains about exercise. Think about this in terms of our prayer lives, to just try it on and to do it. And I do want to say for those of you who have a regular prayer life and are steeped in prayer daily and didn't need to hear any of this, Alleluia. But for those of us who day in and day out struggle with that consistency and wanting to do it better. The better is the doing it. The better is just saying I'm going to give this moment to God. And so on this day and in this lesson may we see the invitation before us to go deeper into our prayer life so that we too

can be more deeply connected and have a shift in our perspective and a sense of God's presence in the here and now as we give that moment here and there to prayer. Amen.