

Asking, Knocking, and Searching
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Date: July 24, 2011

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Prayer is something that we are often taught to do as children and one of the major things that we do in church on Sunday mornings. We worship God together—we sing, we read scripture, we listen to a sermon, and we pray together—for one another and for the world.

Prayers can be simple or complex, memorized or spontaneous; they can be written down as a poem or prose or even written as a letter addressed to God. Prayers can be spoken aloud, sung, or lifted up to God in the silence of your own heart. Prayers can be famous, like the Lord's Prayer, or prayers can be something we've never heard before.

I enjoy reading the prayers that children write to God. In one of the collections I happened upon a little boy named Robert said, "Dear God, I am American, what are you?" Mickey said, "Dear God, if you watch in church on Sunday, I will show you my new shoes." And Jonathan said, "Dear God if you let the dinosaur not be extinct, we would not have a country, you did the right thing."

While these prayers are innocent and maybe even silly, I appreciate how open they are and some of the assumptions that they make. Mickey assumes that God is with her in church on Sunday morning—she wants to show God her new shoes. Jonathan assumes that he can give God praise for allowing the dinosaurs to go extinct; he's giving God some positive feedback, thanking God for a presumed action. And Robert is asking God a question, wanting to know more about God. Robert doesn't just assume that God would be American even though Robert is. Maybe these prayers are simple or comical, but I think that they also reveal so much about what prayer can be.

Adults can get stuffy about praying. We may think that we have to have a specific formula to speak to God; we may think that we have to pray in a specific way in order for our prayers to be worthy. I love the scene in Monty Python and the Holy Grail when God comes to King Arthur in the clouds (and of course is depicted as an old white man with a beard and crown on his head). Arthur falls to his knees and God asks him what he's doing. Arthur replies, "Averting our eyes, oh Lord." God says, "Well don't. It's just like those miserable Psalms, always so depressing. Now knock it off! Every time I try to talk to someone it's 'sorry this' and 'forgive me that' and 'I'm not worthy.'"

In the movie, God just wants to have a conversation with Arthur and charge him with retrieving the Holy Grail. And Arthur is almost incapable of listening to God because he's so preoccupied with the proper behavior he should show and less concerned with the message God is trying to convey.

In this morning's Gospel lesson, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer. His disciples ask him to teach them to pray after Jesus finishes praying on his own. In Luke, Jesus is often depicted as going off on his own to pray. It's actually one of the distinguishing features of Luke's Gospel. There are many verses that say things like, "He was praying in a certain place" or that Jesus went off on his own to pray, often before the disciples woke up for the day.

Jesus, the teacher, the healer, the political threat to Rome, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Prince of Peace—Jesus was a man of prayer. His prayer life defined his ministry and defined who he was as a person of faith. It was part of his way of staying grounded in his mission of spreading the love of God to those he encountered.

So Jesus taught his disciples a formulaic way to pray, a way of prayer that we still use today. In our English Bibles, we translate the word Jesus used for God as "Father." So when we pray the Lord's Prayer we say, "Our Father who art in heaven." In actuality, Jesus called God "Daddy," in Hebrew the word he used was Abba. Jesus' name for God was truly remarkable and made some people nervous. Jesus was claiming that he had a particular and special relationship with God, designated by the familiar title he used to speak to God in prayer.

God was not Yahweh to Jesus or even Father to Jesus, God was Daddy to Jesus—a term of familiarity and endearment, a term that suggested a close and profoundly personal relationship. When Jesus went off on his own to pray, Jesus was praying in a way it seems no one had before, at least not publicly. And Jesus taught his disciples to pray in the same way, referring to God on more personal terms. And that teaching has come down to us because we can pray to God in a profoundly personal way too.

That's part of the reason I love the way children pray to God. It's not censored or limited—children can and do pray to God about anything and everything. And I cringe to think that this openness is somehow stifled as we age.

If we allow ourselves to be vulnerable when we pray, to be honest and open, amazing things can happen. Henri Nouwen, the great theologian, states, "Praying is no easy matter. It demands a relationship in which you allow someone other than yourself to enter into the very center of your person, to see there what you would rather leave in darkness, and to touch there what you would rather leave untouched." Praying is about relationship "in which you allow someone other than yourself to enter into the very center of your person." That is not necessarily the most comfortable place to be.

One of the most uncomfortable experiences I've had with prayer where I felt particularly vulnerable happened the summer I was a hospital chaplain. I was called to respond to the Intensive Care Unit after being informed that a patient had just died. I arrived in the waiting area to discover that there were fifteen family members and that the family was Jewish. When I expressed my condolences, the patient's wife asked if I would go make sure the family could all say their final goodbyes.

After checking with the nurses, I was able to walk the family back onto the unit so they could say goodbye. I stood quietly by the head of the patient's bed with his wife as the family shuffled in and out of the crowded room. At the end, I asked if they would like me to say a prayer for him and his wife tearfully said that she would while gently reminding me that they were Jewish.

I have to admit that I was nervous and wondered if I would be able to say an adequate prayer for this Jewish family grieving the loss of this obviously beloved family member. I wracked my brain for an appropriate prayer and chastised myself for not paying better attention when I learned about this from the Rabbi on staff. So I did the best I could and said the only blessing I guessed would be appropriate. It's a Benediction we sometimes say at the end of church in the Christian tradition and happens to be one of my favorites. I prayed, "May God bless you and keep you. May God's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May God look upon you with kindness and give you peace. Amen."

I looked up to see the family weeping harder and my heart sank thinking that I just unintentionally harmed them. Through her fresh tears, his wife explained that this Benediction, from the Book of Numbers, is often said at life passages in the Jewish tradition. It's called The Priestly Blessing and God instructs Moses to use this special prayer to bless the children of Israel. One of the family members remarked that even though I said the blessing in English and not in Hebrew, it was wonderful just the same.

This was a profound moment of grace for me and I readily admit that I didn't know the origins of the prayer prior to this encounter. But Jesus was born a Jew, raised a Jew, and died a Jew. And the early followers of Jesus were all Jews too, including Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. The Jews of the Jesus Movement incorporated the Hebrew Bible into their new set of beliefs. It would take hundreds of years for Christianity to become a separate religion from Judaism, and Christians have inherited so many things from Judaism, including the Priestly Blessing we sometimes say at the end of our worship. We've made it our own, but the Priestly Blessing began as a uniquely Jewish prayer Moses taught the people of Israel just as the Lord's Prayer became a uniquely Christian prayer that Jesus once taught his followers. It's remarkable that the Priestly Blessing, a prayer that both Judaism and Christianity share, can have such profound meaning in both traditions. Maybe it shouldn't be remarkable, but it was certainly an amazing interfaith moment for me as a chaplain.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray in a specific way and the Priestly Blessing from the Book of Numbers is a specific way to pray too. And sometimes we may need these prayers in moments where words almost fail us because of what we face—whether that's a death or some other crisis. But there are other times when we may just need to have a simple conversation with God or just listen to what God has to reveal to us. When kids can ask God questions or speak to God with such utter honesty, we should all be taking note. And like Henri Nouwen reminds us, prayer is about letting God into the very center of your person.

Jesus encourages us to pray. He tells his disciples, "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to 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." Well despite the words of Jesus, it certainly seems that prayer isn't that easy—it would take another sermon, in fact many sermons, to talk about unanswered prayers and what happens when you knock and the door certainly seems like it's still closed. Or when you search and don't seem to find a thing.

But Jesus is telling us to make the effort. If we don't pray, if we don't open ourselves up to God, if we don't listen, if we don't ask the hard questions—nothing will change, nothing will happen; we definitely won't find the answers because we're not even asking the questions in the first place.

Prayer isn't an easy fix to the problems of life, but it's a start. I don't think that reciting the Priestly Blessing alleviated all the pain that the Jewish family felt at the hospital, but I'd like to think that it helped. I'd like to think that it at least showed them that someone cared about their loved one and wanted to bless him and lift him up to God.

And I think that our lives will be enriched if we go off on our own to pray like Jesus so often did. And I think that our lives will be enriched when we pray the way that Jesus taught us. And I think that our lives will be enriched when we ask, when we knock, and when we search. May it be so with us, Amen.