

TITLE: "Teach us to pray" COP 7-28-13

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON: Luke 11:1-13

By Dr. Lal Hmingliani Browne

11:1 Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' ²He said to them, 'When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

⁵And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." ⁷And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." ⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

⁹So 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. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches, finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

Let us Pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

SERMON: "TEACH US TO PRAY"

Some years ago an expert on Indian Christian spirituality, Father Salim Shariff, visited the church my husband, Will, was serving in Pennsylvania. A series of evening lectures on prayer and spiritual practices was held. People were surprised by the speaker's opening specific instructions on prayer. "Sit facing the east at sun rise," he said. "Keep your feet flat with your open hands on your legs. Close your eyes and sit in silence for 10 minutes. Then begin your prayer."

One of those good Pennsylvania Presbyterians finally asked, "Why facing east?" Father Shariff responded, "Actually it doesn't matter which direction you face. Face north or south or north-by-northwest, it doesn't matter. Pray at first light or 9:15 in the evening. Any time is good. It also doesn't matter if you sit or stand or kneel. You may have your hands open or folded or raised up. You may have your eyes open or closed. None of that is important.

What is important is that you pray. I have found having a set routine helps. Sitting the same direction and at the same time and in the same posture helps you let go of **distractions**, and focus on your communication with God."

Like those Pennsylvania Presbyterians, people have always wanted to know how to pray. Some people I know feel they are **not** good at prayer. Even the most devoted saints of the church hit spells when their prayers seem heavy or forced or false.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus' disciples noticed that the disciples of John-the-Baptist had learned from John how to pray like John. They did not want to pray like John. They wanted to pray like Jesus. So, they asked Jesus, "**Teach us to pray.**" If they had hoped for a simple answer, they did not get it.

Prayer is a conversation with God, an art form that requires discipline. It is like a musical skill such as playing the piano or organ or conducting. We have witnessed such discipline in the playing of our retiring assistant organist, Judy Lutes. Judy worked hard to acquire and refine her skills and she has used with us for 22 years with beauty and precision. **On top of all of that, she had to work on how to get along with John!! – surely the harder task!**

Jesus' answer to his disciples' asking, "Teach us to pray," comes as a four-part lesson. **First**, he teaches them a short prayer. **Second**, he tells them the parable of the Persistently Knocking Neighbor. **Third**, he introduces them to the "ask and receive" sayings. And **fourth**, he helps them see how God's gift of the Holy Spirit is better than any gift given by a human father.

The short prayer Jesus taught the disciples there and then is what we now call the Lord's Prayer. Christians have been praying it for two millennia. It is an extraordinary prayer that teaches us to set aside the things that burden us, and it teaches us to approach God with anticipation, **not fear**. It begins with an invitation to an intimate and personal interaction with God- whom we are taught to call 'Father.' Surely an amazing title to use with the creator of all that is and

has been and ever will be - seen and unseen - the ruler of all things on heaven and on earth!

The disciples and we are then directed to “hallow” or “make great the name of the Lord.” In Jesus’ Jewish background, to know someone’s name is to know that person fully and completely and at every level of his or her being. To ‘hallow’ or ‘make great’ God’s name is to honor and love every part of the greatness and power and majesty and wonder and love that is God. It is no small thing. As commentator William Barclay says, **“to know the whole character and mind and heart of God is to gladly put trust in God.”**¹

To pray like Jesus is to begin and end all things in God. We are to know that the goal of life is to live under God’s gracious rule. We are to know that God provides the ‘daily bread’ for all of life. We are to acknowledge and ask forgiveness for our own sin. And, we are to see that prayerful trust means letting go of our hold on the sin of those who have harmed us.

To pray like Jesus is to be aware that the future may hold things we are ill prepared to handle on our own. So we pray to God not to lead us into temptation. Barclay helps us understand this. **“Temptation means any testing situation. It includes far more than the mere seduction to sin; it covers every situation that is a challenge to and a test of a person’s humanity and integrity and fidelity. We cannot escape sin but we can face it with God.”**²

In teaching his disciples, Jesus teaches all of us to orient ourselves to a mental and spiritual posture that enhances communication with God. He teaches us:

- to think of the intimacy of the relationship we are invited to have with God;
- to focus in trust on the goodness and generosity of God;
- to humbly acknowledge our need for forgiveness;
- to forgive others as we have been forgiven; and to
- trust the future to God’s keeping.

Personally, the Lord’s Prayer is the most powerful prayer I pray. It is the prayer I pray in my most grateful moments of life to give thanks to God, such as when husband came through a surprise quadruple by-pass surgery a year and two

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke: The New Daily Study Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, KY. 2001 p. 170

² p.171

days ago. It is also a prayer I pray when I feel lost or alone or scared or in despair or angry. **I find it helpful to pray it slowly so that I hear the meaning of every word and phrase.**

I practice that in my ministry. I use the Lord's Prayer with people in the hospital; I use it in situations of grief; I use it in times of celebration – I use it in traditional settings and in the 'contemporary' setting of worship in the Garden when I lead in communion there. My husband and I start each day with scripture and prayer and that prayer always ends with our reciting of the Lord's Prayer together.

But **Jesus did not stop with** teaching the disciples the Lord's Prayer. He adds **a** lesson from the parable of the Persistently Knocking Neighbor. Jesus tells us God is unlike the lazy neighbor who only helps because he must. God helps us because he is our loving Father and he loves us at all times.

Next, Jesus teaches the disciples about the "Ask and you shall receive...seek and you shall find...knock and it will be opened to you" sayings. The lesson that Jesus teaches us here is that God who loves us is surely attentive to our every need.

Finally, Jesus teaches that if even fallible human parents know how to give good gifts, how much more can we trust our perfect God to give us what we most need?

All of us wish we could step easily into the world of prayer with God. We may be envious of those who seem to have a gift of words and are comfortable in public prayer. But they too can get lost in their words. They can miss the posture and trust that opens their hearts and minds in prayer. That is certainly true for me and I am no poet of prayer.

Surely we are very fortunate that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray! Prayer is **us** (mortals) relating to **God** the Almighty. It will not always be easy and simple but we are given help and assurance and the invitation to step through the portal of life into the presence of God who loves us always.

Thanks be to God for Jesus who taught us how to pray. Amen.

Charge and Benediction:

Go in Peace and serve the lord.

May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each and every one of us now and forever.