

## Teach Us to Pray

25 July 2010  
Luke 11:1-13

### Pentecost IX

What are the most familiar phrases in Christianity? What are the Christian words that even the staunch atheist recognizes as part of the faith. When it comes to choosing the top ten, "The Lord is my Shepherd" is near the top. "God so love the world that he gave his Son" certainly vies for first place. But I think those words are all beaten by, "Our Father, who art in heaven...." The words of the Lord's prayer are so important that the prayer we know takes the place of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples.

For example, when I came to this church, I suggested that a more modern versions of the prayer and creeds and songs be uttered every week. The congregation did tolerate the movement of the Apostle's Creed to a more contemporary version. You accepted the different versions of the doxology which we sing after the offertory is received. But a number of you resisted my suggestion to modernize the Lord's Pray. We can accept small changes in the Apostle's Creed and the Doxology, but the Lord's Prayer is so sacred that the form we teach our children should be the form that is used in church.

Does our version of the prayer take a priority over the lesson that Jesus taught? Does our version in fact shape our grammar when we say, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name...." Does our version alter our thinking. Do the appropriate and stilted words keep a desired distance between our heavenly Father and us. Does our current use pay homage to our fathers and mothers whose words we repeat. Do the well-known words lull us to sleep with their familiar and hypnotic quality?

What does Jesus say; what does he mean? They are clearer as we are plumb Luke's version of the prayer. Matthew and Luke give virtually the same prayer, but Luke does leave out "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." But the most notable difference is when Jesus teaches the prayer. In Matthew, the prayer is a section of the most beautiful part of the Gospels - The Sermon on the Mount. The sermon is given in a long list of lessons in which Jesus says, "When you pray, pray like this...."

Luke gives us a very different story (perhaps it is a different story told at a different time). Jesus is consumed by prayer, and when he prays, he does so eloquently. In fact he prays better even than John the Baptist, but the disciples are in a quandary about how to pray like Jesus. One of the disciples - perhaps speaking in frustration - says, "Lord, teach us to pray." Jesus presents us with Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer.

The two prayers are very similar and in their messages are identical. We are, however, left with the truly difficult questions. Does the Lord's Prayer work? Will it change God's mind? Are the words of Jesus magical and mysterious? Why then make the prayer an irreversible token that must be said in a precise way? When you pray the prayer, are you truly aware of what you are saying?

Those are difficult questions. Most of you were here when Kim Anderson spoke of a book that had changed her life. Its title was *The Source of Miracles: 7 Steps to Transforming Your Life Through the Lord's Prayer*. She shared what she had learned with a class of 15 or 16

adults. She was so energetic and enthusiastic that the others were inspired. In fact, they suggested that she do a sermon on the book. I encouraged her to do that, and she did a masterful job. She told the whole story with a wonderful application of the prayer. She was determined to get the prayer's seven life tasks - like faith, surrender, and service addressed. She portrayed it through a stunning postcard with the prayer printed upon it. To top that, Carol Beall, her mother did a phenomenal job by incorporating the Lord's Prayer with the Children's Sermon.

What a wonderful service of worship! People were enthusiastic that a young layperson should be so eloquent. There were lots of requests for information on how to get the book, and we were so enthralled with the children's sermon, we wanted to obtain copies of the booklet that Kim and Carol wrote. But I have a question: how many people - despite your enthusiasm - purchased the book. How many lives were changed in the reading of the manual? How many truly pray the Lord's prayer with an emphasis on the seven traits of the Christian? I was really impressed by Kim's sermon. I was moved by the story of the book. But after less than ten weeks, I have gone back to muttering the words of Jesus, "Our Father who art in heaven....."

Did you see *Shadowlands* - a film on the life of C.S. Lewis? It is a wonderful film. It is the story of how his life has been transformed by the faith and revolutionized by romance to a middle aged American woman. One of the most touching parts of the movie is when Lewis returns to Oxford from London where he has been married to Joy Gresham. The marriage occurred at her bedside in the hospital where she is dying. The marriage commemorates the revolution that occurred to Lewis and to Joy by the genuine love they have for one another.

Following the wedding, he returns to Oxford with the good news of his marriage and with the somber reality that Joy will be taken away from him. He is met by Harry Harrington - an Episcopalian priest. Harrington is very aware of Joy's medical condition, and he is hoping for good news from the hospital. Harrington asks, "Is there any news?" Lewis responds, "Good news, I think, Harry. Yes, good news."

Harrington is unaware of the marriage, and he thinks that Lewis is referring to Joy's medical condition. With relief and enthusiasm in his voice, he says, "I know how hard you have been praying.... Now God is answering your prayer."

The brazen Lewis responds, "That is not why I pray, Harry. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I am helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking or sleeping. Prayer doesn't change God; it changes me."

Tom Long writes, "Prayer is not a message scribbled on a note, jammed into a bottle and tossed into the sea in hopes that it will wash up someday on God's shoreline. Prayer is communion with God. We speak to God, but God touches, embraces, shapes, and changes us. Whether we pray for rain or pray for sunshine, our prayer is answered, because in the act of praying we receive the gift we really seek - intimacy with God."

Tom Long writes eloquently, but is the gift we really seek - intimacy with God? Instead of intimacy, we must be content to speak the lines of Lewis, "Prayer doesn't change God; it changes me." Are we so full of pride that we cannot bear the change. Do we muddle through the Lord's Prayer in hopes that God does things our way.

I pray every morning, but I am often swayed by random thoughts that get in the way

of the conversation, and as a result, I forget that God is truly there. Do I lack the faith of C.S. Lewis? Are my prayers a version of scribbling a note, jamming it into a bottle, and hoping that God will someday answer my prayers? Am I so concerned about getting my own way, that I spend all my energy maintaining my ego at the expense of God's will to change my life? Am I apt to pray the Lord's Prayer in an effort to change God, rather than be changed by prayer.

When we see a counselor about depression, the counselor will often ask, "On a scale from one to ten, how depressed are you?" If we translated that to the Christian faith, I would only be doing a four or a five on the faith scale. How Christian are you? At in the beginning to this morning's lesson, isn't that the quandary that floats through the minds of the disciples who ask Jesus how to pray? Isn't their goal an attempt to improve their score to a seven or an eight on the final exam to be a follower of Christ? How can we recapture the emotional state of C.S. Lewis who sincerely said, "Prayer doesn't change God; it changes me."

Prayer presents us with the big questions. I truly believe that prayer is a difficult proposition that we must get right. If prayer were multiple choice: Is prayer answered when God changes life to agree with my wishes? OR Is prayer answered when I allow God to change me? That is where Jesus takes the gospel lesson of this morning.

And it seems that - despite C.S. Lewis - Jesus agrees with the assertion that God will answer my prayer and do what is best for me. Jesus says, "Keep on seeking and you will find. Keep on knocking and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." Jesus, in fact makes it worse. He says, "Moms and Dads, if your kids ask you for a fish, will you give them a snake instead? Or if they ask you for an egg, will you give them a scorpion. Of course not."

A story is told of a pastor who received the most miserable news in the world. One of the members of his staff who was merely walking his dog had been stabbed in the chest area by a would be mugger. They took him to the hospital, and placed him in intensive care without the prospect of survival. When word went out to other clergy, they all gathered in the church. They and all the staff members stood around the communion table, and each person prayed. Prayers were mostly polite and well meant prayers. They prayed for his family and how they would be taken care of. But they prayed prayers were that certainly aware of the prospect of death.

Then it was the custodian's turn to pray. The custodian wrestled with God, shouted at God, argued with God. His fist was shaking in the air while his whole body shook. The custodian shouted, "You've got to save him. You can't let him die! You have done it many times, Lord. You've done it for others, you've done it for me. I am begging you, do it again! Do it for him! Save him Lord!"

The pastor said, "It was as if he had grabbed God by the lapels, and refused to turn God loose until God came with healing wings.... In the face of that desperate cry for help, God would have been ashamed not to save the man's life." And so, much to the soft spoken clergy's surprise, the man was healed.

We elevate C.S. Lewis's faith. Should he have learned a lesson from the custodian? This year, cancer has really made its presence felt in this church. Have the prayers of those who have begged God for healing been heard, while the cancer victims - whose cancer has persisted - have

been blamed for not pray longingly and ardently. I have seen enough suffering among deeply faithful people to question Jesus' guidance. I remember a charismatic person who never ceased praying succumb to a series of dreadful diseases.

Jim Conway was a very conservative pastor who wrote an article about prayer. Jim's daughter, Becky, had cancer. She received excellent medical care, and then came the day when the surgeon said he would have to amputate her leg to save her body. So the family began to pray. They asked God to heal Becky's leg. They prayed that God would heal her so the church could give testimony to the love of God. Jim was so confident in the prayers that on the day of surgery, he begged the surgeon to test her leg before amputating. The surgeon agreed.

Jim and a crowd from the church met in the waiting room, and voices were raised in praise and petition to God. Jim writes, "So many came, in fact that they made us leave the waiting room. When the surgeon came out, I knew what he was going to say and I couldn't face it. I couldn't face all those people, so I ran. I ran to the hospital basement where no one could find me. I cried. I yelled. I pounded my fist against the wall. I felt like the God, whom I served, had abandoned me at the hour of my deepest need. Was he busy answering prayers that someone would find a parking space, so he couldn't take care of my daughter, Becky?"

It was a devastating experience. But Jim's faith deepened. As happened to C.S. Lewis, prayer changed Jim. Prayer is a mystery. I don't know the correct answer to my multiple choice question. I have experienced answered prayer - a time when only the actions of God could change reality. But I sometimes question my grounds for enthusiasm for there were times when I did not get my will and I could only allow prayer to change me.

How is your prayer life? Where do you stand on the multiple choice question?

**Let us pray: Lord, we humbly ask you to hear our prayers. Sometimes we pray our list of prayers as if we had 146 items that were really truly important. Gracious Father, help us to face reality. May our relationship be so sound that you hear our prayers and that prayer changes us. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen!**