



# SAINT LUKE'S

“LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY”  
PROPER 12C

GENESIS 18:20-32  
PSALM 138  
COLOSSIANS 2:6-19  
LUKE 11:1-13

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY  
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Today Jesus teaches us about prayer. I am always mindful that this is the only recorded instance in all the gospels when the disciples directly ask Jesus to teach them something. *Lord, teach us to pray.* The disciples know can't figure out prayer on their own or by simply watching Jesus. The disciples need guidance with prayer, and perhaps we do too.

There are books and methods and forms of prayer: centering prayer, lectio divina with Scripture, the daily offices in our prayer book and many more. All are ways to pray. Prayer is what people of faith do, and it is the primary way we seek to draw closer to God. There are many, many "right" ways to pray. We can get in our own way by getting self-conscious about whether or not we are praying "correctly". Words can become a barrier to relationship with God because we can get hung up on which ones to use.

Jesus gives us these words of the Lord's Prayer as a *way into relationship with God*. They are a primer, a beginning; if you like the Lord's Prayer is an Introit, an entrance anthem into God's presence. We can always start to pray using these words Jesus gives us.

A few things about the Lord's Prayer. There are not many words. The petitions are brief. The first prayer

is for God's kingdom to come. That is the prayer for justice. We are to pray for the bread we need for today. Not for additional food to store up for the future. This implies limits to the material goods we can faithfully pray for. *Lead us not into temptation* applies here. Save us from ourselves and our anxious desires. Jesus also teaches us that we are to extend to others the same forgiveness we have received ourselves. I learned this week that St Augustine said his congregation in North Africa would go silent at the point of forgiving others. His congregation couldn't bring themselves to say the words because they knew they couldn't do it. It is hard. This is why we need to pray for the grace to forgive – to forgive ourselves and others. There are many things missing from Jesus' prayer list: no prayers for success, good health, long life, happiness, prosperity. Jesus teaches us about prayer by what he *doesn't* say as well as what he does.

Jesus concludes his teaching with a parable about persistence in prayer. Your Heavenly Father loves you and will hear you, he says. Our part is to stay in relationship with God, not to quit or pout or get passive-aggressive with God in our spiritual lives.

Some theologians have said that the uniqueness of humanity lies in our capacity for prayer. We are the species enabled to respond to God, we are praying animals. My mother is 85 and is wheelchair bound with vascular dementia. She cannot feed herself any more, but she knows when it is time to pray. Amen she says, after we say grace. She cannot remember how many brothers and sisters she has, but she remembers what prayer is. The instinct for prayer runs deep in the human soul. It is our inborn connection to the God who created us for relationship with Him.

Prayer cannot be defined by any one method and prayer cannot be “mastered”. Whatever age we are, we are always beginners and that is wonderful. Underneath all forms and methods and words, Prayer is listening. Prayer is listening for and responding to the Holy Spirit as we hear her promptings. Prayer is being in God’s presence, relationship with God, often with more silence than words, and sometimes using other responses than words. *He who sings prays twice*, says St. Benedict. We can pray through art and music and creation, through gardening. So many ways to respond to God. *Pray as you can and not as you can’t.*<sup>1</sup> Whatever way you feel closest to God, walk

<sup>1</sup> *Dom John Chapman O.S.B. (1865-1933)*

that path in your prayers.

The Psalm today begins: *I will give thanks to you O Lord with my whole heart.* I will open my heart to God. That is the basis of prayer and worship. As we trust that it is safe to be open with God, just to be there before him however we are feeling, bringing our hurts and angers as well as our joys, prayer can begin to unfold.

Prayer can become as natural as breathing. We start wherever we are with whatever we are feeling. We share it with God in whatever words: God can handle any and all of our feelings. Or we offer our state of mind to God without even trying to find the words: angry, afraid, tired. Annie Lamott's recent book is titled: *Help, Thanks, Wow: the three essential prayers* (ie: the basic needs we have of God: the human need for God's assistance; to give thanks; to experience the joy and wonder of life).

What is the point of prayer? Does it change anything? Is it just delusion to comfort ourselves, words into the void? Jesus' parable seems to promise the disciples something that we may not believe is true. We know God is not a holy vending machine dispensing whatever we ask, no matter how persistent we are.

Here's the thing, though. Do I pray simply to get what I want from God, for myself or for others? Or is the point something else? And what is the gift God gives? What if getting what we pray for is not the point, even if we do receive it? What if the point is connection with the Divine. What exactly does Jesus promise his disciples today?....*How much more will your heavenly Father give the **Holy Spirit** to those who ask him.* What if the point of prayer is growing the relationship with the Holy Spirit in us? What if the point of prayer is a deeper and deeper awareness that God is as close to us as our own breathing? What if the adventure of prayer is experiencing God as not separate from us but in our living bodies? Prayer is God's calling us to experience the Divinity in us and in everyone and everything else in the world. Lastly, a true story. My spiritual director has an elderly friend who is approaching the end of her long earthly life. She cannot do much physically any more but she can still read and pray and talk. She said to my spiritual director recently: *These days are wonderful. I am falling into God.* That is a profound understanding of eternal life and also of prayer: falling into God.

AMEN



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