

Lectionary 17 (C)
7th Sunday after Pentecost
July 24, 2022
Text: Luke 11:1-13

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My earliest memory of praying is reciting by memory the bed-time prayer that my parents taught me: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” I don’t recall being especially disturbed by contemplating every night the possibility of death at a very young age. It was more like—that was just what we did at bedtime every night, and the words just sort of washed over me without any particularly close attention to their meaning. Prayer was just a formal kind of thing. It was these words at this time of day, with hands folded and head bowed—and that’s how it was done.

In the years since then I’ve learned that prayer can be so much more—more feeling, more attention, more being fully present. Or it can be less—less formal, less words, even simple silence. I’m grateful that my parents taught me to pray, taught me to think of prayer as an important activity and to expect that it should be a regular part of my life, but I don’t pray “Now I lay me down to sleep” at bedtime anymore. I wonder how you learned to pray. Did you have a parent or grandparent teach you a simple, memorized prayer? Or maybe they weren’t sure how to teach you, but hoped you could pick up whatever you might need from church. I wonder if how you pray has changed over the years. I hope so, because I’m sure you’ve grown and changed over the years, and we can approach prayer and approach being present to God in so many different ways.

One of the ways I’ve changed is with what I think prayer is, what I think I’m doing when I pray. One of the lessons I took away from prayer at church when I was very young was that prayer is how I tell God what I want or need. At that age, prayer was about getting God to do what I wanted, whether it was “Make my Aunt Barbara well,” or “Help me find the coat I lost.” Looking back now as an adult, that way of praying seems a bit too much like a vending machine—insert the proper prayer to get what you want. I don’t believe prayer works like that anymore. I can still remember the disappointment and confusion I felt when I was 8 or 9 and a family pet died. But I had prayed for God to help him! I wonder if you’ve ever felt angry or confused when you prayed for something, or someone, but nothing happened. Maybe you felt God wasn’t even listening, that prayer really didn’t matter at all. Maybe you even stopped praying—for a while, or altogether. Unhelpful expectations about prayer can cause real pain and real spiritual difficulty.

I believe something important happens to our ideas about prayer and our practice of prayer when we believe that God already knows everything about what we need or want. There’s nothing we can tell God that God doesn’t already know. Instead, prayer is about our relationship with God and our connection to God. The primary beneficiary of prayer is us—not because of how it can help us get what we want, but because of how it can steady us, or strengthen us, or transform us, and help us move forward faithfully through a challenging time. And this morning we have an opportunity to let Jesus’ wisdom about prayer speak to our hearts and to our practice of prayer.

Jesus’ disciples had asked him to teach them to pray, so Jesus taught them what we know as

the Lord's Prayer, a way of praying that we still use in our worship every time we gather. The Lord's Prayer can work just fine as a formal, memorized prayer, but it can also be more. The Lord's Prayer can also serve as a kind of outline for our thoughts or a guide for prayer, helping us to focus our attention so that we speak from our hearts about everything that's most important, about our love for God and our longing for God's justice to be done in the world. Jesus' way of praying invites us to trust that God will provide for us, also to be aware of our shortcomings and our need to both give and receive forgiveness; and we express the desire that God would protect us from dangers far too big for us to face alone. The Lord's Prayer can be so much more than words we recite in a formal sort of way. It can be an invitation to be fully present to God, to bring our whole selves, all our hopes and fears.

Jesus invites us to pray in a very intimate sort of way, to open our hearts to God, to call on the mystery and power behind all of creation as our Father, our heavenly parent. I wonder how that feels to you to say, "God our Creator, our Father, here we are, your flawed, beloved children." I've known a number of Christians who've had real trouble with this. For some, it was because of painful relationships with their own fathers. It undermined their ability to trust or open their heart to a heavenly father—although maybe praying to a heavenly mother wouldn't carry all the same baggage. For others, it was worries about God's judgment that got in the way. They felt unworthy or afraid of God. But Jesus wants us to trust God's compassion and care, to know that they are more than what even the best human parent can give. I wonder what way of picturing God helps you know that God's care and compassion are for you, that God is close to you.

For me, this is really the heart of the Lord's Prayer—trusting God so that we aren't driven by anxiety or fear or worry; not by guilt or shame; not by desire or resentment or anything else. Jesus' way of praying invites us to be rooted and steadied by our trust in God's love for us and our commitment to Jesus' way of love. When we're looking for the outcome of prayer, we may or may not see a change in external circumstances. Sometimes it seems that God works through a situation to provide exactly what we have asked for, and sometimes not. Lacking God's perspective on our lives, we can't explain why. It's one of the mysteries of prayer. But the outcome we can count on is an internal change, that God's Spirit will be at work in our hearts for our own transformation. Perhaps we'll receive renewed strength, or greater compassion, or patience. Maybe we'll receive the assurance of forgiveness, or the ability to forgive someone else. Sometimes we'll find that prayer can help us be grateful, or break down our pride and nurture a sense of humility. In every case, praying like Jesus helps refocus our lives. When we pray, when we entrust our whole selves to God who is all about compassion and forgiveness, we are aligning our hearts and minds with Jesus' way of grace and love. We might be disoriented and confused by the anger and greed and fear that seem to saturate our culture, but praying helps reorient us to what matters most, to Jesus' way of love that gives life and blessing.

I love what our prayer of the day this morning says, that God is always more ready hear than we are to pray, and gladly gives more than we either desire or deserve. That confidence in God's goodness and love is what drives our prayer. It's not only that life can be so challenging or painful that the need just flows out of us all the time. Even more it's knowing that God will meet our need with compassion and mercy greater than we can imagine. Thanks be to God. Amen.