

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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How do you pray? What's the "right" thing to say? I want to have a better prayer life, but how? I get these questions often. And, apparently, the disciples, or at least one disciple, had the same question for Jesus in today's gospel. It's an understandable question. We hope that, like baking a cake, if we discover the right formula, mechanism, or magic process then life will be pretty sweet.

This passage, however, like others, has created some "difficulties for believers on the nature and the efficacy of prayer," says Dr. David Lose.<sup>1</sup> For, when incessant prayer doesn't seem to stop cancer from spreading, or a young child's auntie from touching them "there," or a spouse from knocking their partner unconscious in a drunken rage, or the loosening of the grip of dementia, anxiety, depression, or relationship issues, we begin to wonder. We wonder if maybe we didn't pray right, or that we didn't have enough people praying, or we weren't good enough. So, we utter "Lord, teach us to pray" hoping to get an answer. Let's more deeply explore today's reading to see what we might discover.

First, let's look at the disposition of the petitioner in verses 5-6. There, we find the story the petitioner had an unexpected guest and wanted to provide the best hospitality. So, the petitioner goes to a friend, the sleeper, and asks for what he needs to best serve his guest. We have to remember that this was before 24-hour grocery

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1570>

stores and before we could track someone's GPS location to know if they're coming to visit. We discover that the petitioner doesn't ask for their own sake, but, rather, they asked for ways they can serve another well. The petitioner's needs are grounded in the need of another, which I think is one of the take-aways from this reading.<sup>2</sup>

Next, we see the sleeper's response. The key to understanding this section is in verse 8, and more specifically, the phrase "because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs." Per usual, what is key to this passage is saturated with ambiguity.

Let's begin by looking at the word translated as "persistence." A more literal translation from the original Greek would be "shamelessness" or "imprudence," as in "a lack of sensitivity to what is proper" or "a willful lack of concern about acquiring public shame." But, then, it begs the question: whose shamelessness is it? Does the phrase "his persistence" in verse 8 refer to the petitioner or the sleeper? Is it that the petitioner's shamelessness in making a scene that finally motivated the sleeper to get up? In other words, is it the incessant nagging of humanity that finally gets God to respond? If that is the case, then isn't that directly against our Lutheran beliefs that God always comes to us? Doesn't it put the emphasis on what *we* do instead of what God does? So, perhaps that's not who is the shameless one. So, Dr. Walter Liefeld suggests a deeper interpretation. You see, while the petitioner does act with shameless disregard for his neighbors to best serve his guest, after the petitioner goes to the sleeper, the focus of the parable shifts to the sleeper. And, so, it's likely the shamelessness is that of the sleeper rather than the petitioner. For, it is the sleeper's shamelessness that will bring honor to both the petitioner and the sleeper. In other words, we have a God who will go to shameless lengths to respond to our needs.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2016/07/the-petitioner-and-sleeper-of-prayer.html>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4119](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4119)

And, just like the ways that this parable communicates to us something about our God, so too prayer communicates what we theologically believe about God. Which is probably why praying is so intimating to some. As Dr. Matt Skinner puts it, prayer is like buying a blank card at the store and coming home to think “Now what in the world am I going to write?” It’s so much easier to buy a card with a few cute sentences in it and then, add a little something and sign it. So too, prayer is much easier when we take some examples from the psalms, prayer books, and, even, Jesus to center us until we build our confidence.<sup>4</sup> But, I have to caution you, not all prayers and resources are created equal, for every prayer communicates a theology – a theology that shapes how we understand God and how we discover God’s work in our world. So, finding resources rooted in your beliefs is important. On page 15 of your bulletin and on the insert, you’ll see some resources that you may find helpful in your prayer journey.

So too, in today’s reading, we’re not left with the task to pray without a helpful example. Jesus gave us what we might call the Lord’s prayer. But, this version might feel a little different than the one we often say together here from Matthew’s gospel, but nevertheless, it has a lot of similar parts.

The prayer begins with centering ourselves in the relational nature of God’s presence using the term “Father.” For, our God is not some removed entity. Instead, our God has loving care for all. A God whose name is “hallowed” or “holy,” that is, God’s name is set apart as something fully reflective of God’s vision for the world. That is, a vision that recognizes God’s kingdom that would come to us. A kingdom that, in Luke, is centered in Jesus’s mission statement given in chapter 4. It’s a kingdom that

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5367>

preaches good news to the poor, releases the captives, gives sight to the blinded, gives freedom to the oppressed, and proclaims God's favor for all. That's what it looks like for the kingdom to come here and now. And, friends, that is the most significant political statement anyone could ever make. As a Christian, you are a part of a political movement that declares that Trump, Obama, Republican, Democrat, Socialist, Libertarian, and all other ideologies are second rate and that the only true king, or president, or prime minister that can rule how we engage and treat others is God. Hard stop. End statement.

So, each time you pray, Jesus is calling us to proclaim a commitment to things of God's good nature, and not of the world. You're praying that we are all given "our daily bread," that is, that we're given resources to meet today's needs with equity and economic justice so that all may have life. We're asking that all our sins, that is all the ways the we are egotistical, self-centered, and exclusive are forgiven. We ask that we might treat other people with grace to forgive the ways they have been indebted to our generosity. We ask for God to help us find places and people that help make this new kingdom come to life with a greater ease. That, friends, is how to pray. It's a prayer focused on how we treat others; it's a prayer that acknowledges our dependence on God; it's a prayer that recognizes that we are asking to be shaped, transformed, and conformed to an alignment with God's vision for the world. It's the same thing our members did last Sunday in the "Deepen with WPLC" workshop. It's taking where we are now and scanning our lives to find ways to bring about better alignment with God's vision.

In Jesus's prayer, there is no magic statement that says every self-centered need will be granted. Rather, if we ask to be transformed into alignment with God's vision, then we shall receive it. If we seek to be aligned with God's vision, then we will be aligned.

If we put our time, effort, and purpose into this alignment then we'll get there. For, we have a God who will give us the good gifts of a loving parent. A God who will give us a spirit of holiness that will give us the gifts of holy alignment with God's vision.

So, friends, today, we ask to be taught how to pray. We bring our full theological convictions to our prayers. We bring the theology that Jesus reminds us of in his prayer. A theology that is rooted in loving God, loving our neighbor, and loving our self for the good of bring about God's vision. So, as you get your legs for pray, fall back on the gift of Jesus's prayer. In it, I pray that you discover our God who is shamelessly ever-present, ever-loving, and eternally gracious. Amen.