

Luke 11:1-13
St. Andrew's, Nogales

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25 July 2010

Anne Lamont, a well-known contemporary writer, says she has two basic prayers. "Thank you, thank you" and "Help me, help me, help me." I see some nods and smiles out there. Are these your basic prayers also?

When did we learn to pray? Who taught us? What did they teach us? How do we pray and what do we pray for? These are questions worth thinking about.

Different ways of praying have been emphasized and taught throughout Christian history. However, being taught that a certain tradition is the only way to pray can become a stumbling block to many people. Sometimes we get taught by someone who insists on a certain way to pray, a way that perhaps works for them, but not necessarily for us.

So it is important from time to time to go back to the basics of the prayer which Jesus taught his disciples when one of them asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

And what Jesus teaches them is the prayer with which we Christians have always prayed down through the centuries. It is based on our Judeo-Christian understanding that God is with us. It is a very human prayer. It does not require us to run a marathon when we pray it. It is short and to the point, sounding a bit pushy or even outright presumptuous, if you think about it.

So let's think about this prayer Jesus taught us for a moment:

It begins with a greeting. Jesus gives us the words to address God and to praise God, "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come."

Then he moves the prayer right into petitioning God for one thing right after another:

Give us ...

Forgive us ...

Lead us ...

Deliver us ...

We have repeated this prayer so many times in our lives, usually quietly and reverently, that we don't realize how aggressive it is. There are no pleasing or pleading words, just "Give us, forgive us, lead us, deliver us"!

You may remember that in the gospel of Matthew there is a moment when Jesus warns people to avoid the unnecessary wordiness practiced by hypocrites who think they will be heard because of their lengthy prayers. No, Jesus says cut to the chase with God.

Prayer can run the gamut from wordless meditation, to short breath prayers, to repetitive prayers, to inarticulate mumblings, to beautifully composed prayers prayed for centuries, and to formal communal prayers we do together on Sunday mornings. And prayer can include screaming at God when necessary. I know. I've done it.

We can pray to God in all the conditions and circumstances we find ourselves as individuals and as a community.

Give us – we are dependent

Forgive us – we are guilty

Lead us – we are lost

Deliver us – we are vulnerable and we are asking for God's protection

All we are called to do is recognize the depths of our need and to have the humility to ask for God's help. That's it. Our most desperate prayer may just be that one word. "Help!"

Do note we might not always be able to say 'thank you' in the same moment we are calling for help.

Let me return to the part about forgiveness:

"And forgive us our sins
For we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us."

I like the way Professor Bill Countryman explains our needing forgiving everyone indebted to us in order to be forgiven:

"Since God's love for us is expressed in forgiveness," he says, "we can expect the same to be true of the love that derives from God's love. Every human being is loved and forgiven on exactly the same terms. This means that our love for our neighbor, as for ourselves, must often take the form of forgiveness too.... The point is that the gift of forgiveness is offered equally to every human being. That is the only way God offers it. Therefore we cannot accept it for ourselves while trying to deny it to someone else." (Good News of Jesus: Reintroducing the Gospel, pp.46-47)

Through prayer we enter into a conversation with God, much like a conversation with a friend. It is based on our understanding that God wishes to maintain a relationship with God's people.

At bottom, prayer is about availability, our being open and available to God. It's not about bargaining, but it is about persistence, as in the story Jesus tells of the man who knocks in the night on his neighbor's door for help to feed unexpected guests. He says the neighbor will respond, not because he is a friend, because of the man's persistence in asking.

One commentator says, “God, even more than a friend, is obliged and committed to respond to those in need.” And he recommends that we pray with a persistence so determined that it borders on presumptuousness.” I like that, pray in a way that borders on presumptuousness. It borders on shamelessness also!

Then Jesus adds some of my favorite words from all of scripture, and of course it’s one of my favorite hymns, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”

And he says that if even broken human parents care for their children as best they can how much better will God provide those things that nourish us humans? And what most nourishes us? The gift of the Holy Spirit.

So as we come to the table this morning, let us both presumptuously and shamelessly pray the prayer that Jesus taught us. And let us pray not only that God’s kingdom come to us, but also that we might become a means toward bringing about that very end by sharing the gifts of the spirit.

Amen.