

May what is spoken here, and what is heard  
    be spoken and heard  
    in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.  
Amen.

"Lord," the disciples said, "teach us to pray."

Surely the disciples' request is also our request,  
    for I doubt that many of us here today  
        would consider ourselves 'experts' at prayer.  
But I also believe that there is a God-shaped space in each of us  
    that longs to be filled,  
    a deep urge with us that want to be connected  
        with something greater,  
    a profound desire to believe even for a moment  
        that Somebody out there cares ...  
        that Somebody out there cares for us.

And so we say, "Lord, teach us to pray".

Teach us, because for many of us,  
    practicing prayer is like visiting a foreign country.  
We go there occasionally, but we don't really feel at home.  
The customs are different, and the language is strange  
    (especially Rite 1).  
This is the country where mystics and saints live,  
    but not the likes of you and me.

Many books have been written about prayer.  
There are books on centering prayer, corporate prayer,  
    journaling, prayer posture, prayer stools,  
    and even breathing exercises.

From the amount of all that writing,  
    you'd think that prayer was harder than flying a jet plane.

I sometimes think that we Christians  
have been given too much instruction about prayer,  
especially in light of what Jesus said to do.

Jesus didn't require the disciples to close their eyes  
of bow their heads or fold their hands.  
He didn't tell them to stand or kneel.  
He simply said, "just do it".  
Like this: come before God boldly and say "Father, ... Daddy".

Abraham knew how to "just do it".  
Think about today's reading from Genesis.  
No false piety on Abraham's part,  
no reluctance to ask for what he wanted.

"You don't mean to tell me, O God,  
that you're going to destroy a city  
with 50 righteous people in it".  
And then he haggled God right down from 50 to 45  
to 40 and 30 and 10.

Now, Abraham's God is not some divine bellhop  
who jumped when Abraham rang,  
but Abraham's story promises  
that the terms of life are negotiable  
and that prayer is heard and answered.

Sometimes I think we don't pray  
because it does seem too complicated,  
and sometimes we don't pray  
because we wonder if prayer is necessary.  
After all, God knows what we need before we ask,  
and God does better things for us  
than we can ask or imagine.

And so we remain silent before God,  
not daring to speak because God knows better.  
Understandable, I suppose,  
but it's a little like refusing to make new friends  
because we don't know what to say to them.

And if some things seem to trivial to bother requesting from God,  
others seem too big.

Dare I ask God for peace throughout the world?

It is also tempting to let God off the hook  
by praying only for the attainable -  
to avoid the disappointment of not getting what we ask for,  
or to ask just once, and then politely go away.

But according to Jesus,  
the most important thing about prayer  
is to do it and keep at it.  
Jesus says that prayer is like a midnight visitor  
pounding at the door of a friend  
until that friend hauls himself out of bed.

"Ask, search, knock," says Jesus.  
Ask God to give and forgive.  
Jesus doesn't teach us to be shy when we pray,  
but rather to say what is on our minds and in our hearts.  
So let's do it. Let's pray.  
Let's pray about our lives:  
about what we've done - good and not-so-good,  
and what we've failed to do,  
and about what we want to do.

Pray about who we are and who we wish we were.  
Pray about who we love and who we don't love.  
Pray about what matters the most to us.

Sometimes our prayers change,  
and we begin to realize  
that we don't really want what we thought we wanted after all.  
And sometimes in praying for someone  
we'd rather pray for than sit next to,  
our hearts are moved  
to love and understanding and forgiveness.

And prayer always gets a response.

A friend of mine says that God has four answers to prayers:

#1: Yes, and I thought you'd never ask

#2: No, I love you too much for that

#3: Yes, but not yet

#4: Yes, and here's more

And perhaps even more important than knowing  
that God listens to prayer  
is knowing that God speaks in prayer.

I expect that when our talking ends,  
praying begins in earnest.

For when the words run out,  
all that is left is the unspeakable yearning.  
And that is when we are broken open to hear God speak to us.

God's word may be as inexpressible as our prayer,  
but if we're listening,  
eventually we'll hear it and be changed by it.

Too often, we pray for definite answers.

We want to hear a heavenly voice say:

'go, wash in the Jordan and be healed',

or, 'forgive your brother and he will never hurt you again',

or, 'take the left fork in the road'.

Too often, we want to be rescued from our freedom and told what to do.

But too that God does say, "no, I love you too much for that".

'You won't necessarily get precise marching instructions,' God says,

'but I will prepare your heart to discover the answer.

I will be with you', God promised,

'and support you until you hear the answer.

And when you do, you will know that it comes from me'.

Well, what do we do in the meantime?

Just keep praying, Jesus says,

keep knocking, because the door will open.

Pray that when we get little and petty,  
    God will enlarge our souls beyond our personal wants.  
Pray that when we grow cold inside,  
    God will enfold us in the warmth of His love.  
Pray that when life seems overwhelming,  
    we will always know that we don't face it alone.

God has promised to be with us,  
    and maybe that's all we ever need to pray for after all.  
God has promised to be with us,  
    and sealed that promise with the very life-blood of his only Son.

We don't need massive instruction for prayer.  
Just talk.  
And when we're through talking, just be -  
    long enough and often enough.

And the Lord will teach us to pray.

Amen.

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