
Teach Us to Pray

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Proper 12 – Year C

“And he said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend.’”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Years ago, after I had just arrived at the Cathedral, a man walked in off the street and said that he wanted to see a priest. I went down and greeted him, and he had a simple question: “Teach me how to pray.”

I asked him how things were going, and they were not going well. He had lost his wife. He had lost his job. He had lost his hope. He thought he was about to lose his mind. And he thought it was time to learn how to pray.

So I began to tell him what I had been taught. I began to go over with him all of the different kinds of prayer. I told him about petition, adoration, confession, oblation, intercession. I told him about the daily office: morning prayer, noonday prayer, evening prayer, and compline. I told him about praying without words: centering prayer, meditation.

And the more I talked, the more bewildered he became. The more I talked, the more I could see the energy drained from his face. I think it actually fell—his face—and when I finished, he looked at me and he said, “Gosh, that’s a lot. I was thinking maybe stopping and saying thank you in the morning, and maybe stopping and saying I’m sorry at night.”

He knew something about prayer that I did not.

Most of us, I think, grow up asking God for things—intercessory prayer, this is called. And I think it’s natural, as children we naturally turn to our parents to ask for things. As adults, we naturally turn to our friends to ask for things. We are, after all, human. And to be human is to be in need. To be human is to be in relationship. To be human is to learn to ask for things, and to be asked by others for things. We can’t live by ourselves. We depend on each other and so, I think, asking for things is a natural turn for us. It’s a natural way that we address God.

But it can become somewhat mechanical if we are not careful.

There is an old joke about a man who’s late for a meeting. He is in a very crowded parking lot and after circling twice, he finally gives up hope and calls on God. “God,” he says, “I will go to church every single Sunday for a year if you will just give me a parking place.”

No sooner has he offered this prayer than a space opens right before him and so he says, “God, God, nevermind. I found one.”

There is a darker side to this mechanistic transaction—a way of being with God though—it’s not long before our unanswered prayers are about a friend with a diagnosis that won’t change; a parent that doesn’t get better; poverty that won’t go away; violence, it seems, unending; a sense that the world is out of joint, not right, and how could God let that happen?

We know, of course, that while God is the creator, God is not the only power in the world. Scriptures are clear of the demonic. However you want to picture evil, it is present. It is here and the best response we have to why, I think, is we don't know.

So many of our efforts to tighten down the analysis, to offer a clear explanation, wind up putting God in a box. They don't ultimately work. They leave us with unanswered prayers, frustrated expectations, sad and lonely feelings.

So we find ourselves just where the disciples were: asking, "Teach us to pray. How is it that we should pray?"

And Jesus, I think, goes right to this mechanistic view of God and the world. Jesus goes right to this notion that if we're just good enough, we just pray in the right way, we just say the right things, God will give us what we ask. God will make everything alright. God will restore order, bring forth peace, alleviate all poverty and pain.

And the key, I think, is where Jesus starts.

"Father," he says, "Abba." Pray to God as a friend, as an intimate acquaintance. Pray to God as a child would pray to his father. Pray to God in trust that God is present, is there

"Hallowed be thy name," or make thy name holy. Pray that God will do what is necessary to remain holy. Because when the kingdom comes, everything else will find its place. Everything else will be alright. Everything else will have its meaning.

We will have the bread we need for the day. We will have the security and freedom we need from testing. But it's about Abba, the Father. It's about being in relationship, not transactional but personal.

It's not about saying the right prayer at the right time in the right way to get what we want—or think we want.

It is instead about being in relationship with God, trusting God the way we might a parent, trusting that God is present, alive, real.

And to drive this point home Jesus then gives us the example of what I refer to as the sleepy neighbor.

A friend comes into your house. You don't have the bread to be hospitable. You go to your neighbor in the middle of the night, beat on the door, waking the family, asking for bread. In our translation, it is persistence that seems to be rewarded: "Because of your persistence, he will answer the door."

I suggest to you that that's not the best translation. The better translation would be, "Because of your shamelessness, he will answer the door." It was a culture where hospitality was very important. It was a culture where what people thought of you was very important. It was a culture where if your neighbor knocked on your door, no matter how late, no matter how annoying, you will answer. If your neighbor asked for a cup of sugar or a cup of milk, you will be giving it to them even if you don't want to, even if this is the third time, even if you tried to give it to them at dinner the night before, you will answer the door because that's what neighbors do.

It's not the persistent knocking on the door that triggers the response. It's shamelessness—asking when you have no right to ask, showing up when you know it's a bad time, trusting that your neighbor will be there. And if that is true, Jesus says, how much more true will it be that God will be there?

It's not about a transaction. It's not about the right form. It's about being in a personal relationship with God. That is the essence of prayer. And when we can start here, sometimes as simple as saying thank you in the morning or I'm sorry at night, then slowly God seems to be like a friend. You can have this sense, fleeting at first but ultimately sustaining, that you are in fact loved by God, a God you don't fully understand but a God you can fully love. A God who is present, often as the other, as a power and presence that we experience when we engage the world. Right here, right now. Today.

This sense that God is a friend, then, can inform our prayer. It becomes easier. It's not about the right words or the right posture or the right time. It's about being honest, being truthful, being simple. This is the essence of prayer, just as it is the essence of personal relationship. This is the essence of prayer, just as it is the essence of friendship. This is the essence of prayer just as it is the essence of love. Take your time, be honest, tell the truth.

Not long after that man walked into the Cathedral, I was in the gym one morning, when a friend came over with that look

on his face. Life was not going well. His marriage wasn't going well. His job wasn't going well.

"George," he said, "do you think you can teach me how to pray?"

I looked at him and asked what he was doing now.

"How are you praying today?"

"I'm not really," he said. "I can't quite figure out how, where to start, what to do."

I said, "You might start by getting up in the morning and saying thank you, and going to bed at night and saying I'm sorry. You might start there. There's more, of course, and I can talk to you about that later, but it's really about entering into a relationship, kind of like a friend or a loving parent. You might start there."

And as I talked I could see him perk up. I could see his face rise. I could see his eyes light up.

"This makes sense," he said. "I think I can do that."

Take your time. Be honest. Tell the truth. This is the way our Lord taught us to pray. Prayer, you see, is really just a conversation that happens inside of a personal relationship with God.

Amen.