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The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

“Lord’s Prayer”



I remember a seminary professor during a class on Christian Spirituality, almost offhandedly saying, “You can tell a lot about someone’s view of God by taking a look at their prayer life.” I have to confess when I heard this professor make this comment my immediate thought was “uh oh.” Oh sure, I was reading plenty of books on prayer and I could tell you how a lot of other people prayed: I could tell you about the eastern-flavored meditation practices of a Thomas Merton, I could tell you how St. Augustine wrote out his prayer in the form of a Confession, I’d love to tell you about Theresa of Avila’s language of prayer as a slow descent into the Interior Castle. When I was in seminary, I was way more comfortable talking about them than talking about my own rather feeble prayer life. Prayer – keeping up a daily prayer – practice was really hard for me in seminary because I was so busy reading about it.

I will say that becoming a parent has changed the way I pray. I find that my prayers have become more childlike, much simpler. God please help Addie sleep through the night. Lord, please help her to be healthy. I pray she have a good day at day care. Lord, please don’t let her explode out of one of her diapers. Help me to be a father worthy of her trust. And maybe the simplest prayer, the one I pray the most: Thank you. When all other prayers fail, that one can hold you and ground you and give you life.

I like the joke about the guy looking for a parking place praying, “God, if you show me a space I’ll go to church, I’ll tithe, I’ll stop cheating on my taxes... oh wait God, never-mind, here’s a spot.”

This raises the question – does praying for specific things actually make a difference? Does praying for Addie to have a good night sleep actually affect her REM cycles? Is her fussing at 4:30 a sign of unanswered prayer? Is this God giving me a snake instead of the egg I was asking for? I realize this is a pretty low stakes example, but still, it raises the question, and it highlights the problem in this morning’s gospel. What is Jesus saying when he says, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” Read the wrong way, this verse renders prayer transactional, inviting us to believe that God is a cosmic gum ball machine into which we can insert our prayers like so many shiny quarters.

We are called to be childlike when we pray, but that doesn't mean we should have childish views of God. While we call God "Father," we aren't saying that God is a big being in the sky. God isn't a male deity. Some people get hung up on calling God "Father" and instead choose to call God "Mother," which is fine. I've heard of some people calling God "Mother-Father"... but that sounds too much like a cuss word to me. For some, "Holy Parent" works. The point: God is the source of our being, not a cosmic gumball machine, not a Santa Claus in the sky.

And yet, if we can't always get what we pray for, why should we pray? Why bother? Our inner stoic wonders if its easier to just take on a kind of resignation – no use asking for anything since what will be will be.

The whole point of our gospel pushes against this resignation; God wants us to bother. God wants us to bother if for no other reason than the fact that prayer is good for us. And God wants us to pray and ask God for what we need. The parable Jesus tells is about an ordinary human circumstance: your friend comes into town, surprises you, and not having anything to eat, and the stores being closed, you run next door – just a couple of pieces of bread is all. The point I draw is that prayer is about ordinary wants.

Prayer is good for us because in it we bring our ordinary wants and needs to God. And I think doing that we understand more deeply that we are children of God and that he is our Loving Parent, totally and absolutely in love with us. It is normal human behavior to ask this God for what we want. What would you think of a child who never asked his parents for anything? What would her parents think of her? Would they think she was being unselfish? Or would they think she was a dreadful little prig?

Now there are some high-minded people who say we shouldn't pray for vulgar material things like getting better from illness or getting a good grade on an exam, but only for spiritual goods like becoming more generous or wiser. I think this is mistaken, and frankly a bit dishonest. I suspect they prefer to pray for spiritual things because these are less visible and it's harder to check on whether their prayer has really been answered. No: God wants our honest prayer, our ordinary wants, our truest longings. Not what we ought to want but what we actually want.

And so when you pray, consider what you want and need and

never mind how vulgar or childish it might appear. If you want very much your daughter to meet the right person or you want to land that new job, that is what you should pray for. You should let world peace rest for a while. You may not be ready yet to want that passionately. And there is no point in pretending before the Almighty. Honest prayer is, it turns out, far riskier too. If we pray and acknowledge our most infantile desires, there is every danger that we may grow up a bit, that God will grow us up.

Of course, God already knows what it is we really want, but the question is: do we? Maybe prayer is an opportunity for that discovery, that self-discovery. Our hearts are tangled, complex, mysterious – we contain multitudes within. When we bring what is in us before God, when we name our wants, we discover what they actually are. When we ask, seek and knock on God’s door, perhaps the door that’s opened is the door to our own hearts. We come face to face with ourselves. When (as honestly as you can) you open yourself up, when you speak to God of your desires, very gently and tactfully she will often reveal to you that in fact you have deeper and more mature desires. But there is only one way to find out: start where you are.

This makes me wonder: do I fully mean the Lord’s Prayer when I pray it each week; do I know what I am asking for? Do I really know what I am asking for when I petition God to bring God’s kingdom to earth? Do I acknowledge this means that my little kingdom must be overthrown? Do I want that? Uhhh...not really. Do I want the forgiveness of sins? To be forgiven is to take responsibility for wrongdoing and to give up the blame game; to be unshackled from the past and liberated to lean into a future that is wild and adventurous and beyond my control? Do I want that? Some days, maybe. Do I want daily bread, or am I more interested in storing up my own provisions, which is easier than trusting God on a day in day out basis? Do I want God to help me avoid trials; or would I rather take life in my own hands to avoid confrontation and challenge?

The Lord’s Prayer is an adult prayer; I pray the grace of God grow me into meaning it more fully. Even still, we say it each week. In saying it, maybe it will get in deeper. And notice this: Jesus says to pray “Our Father.” He doesn’t say “My Father.” Don’t miss the beauty here: we stand with Jesus when we say the Our Father. He stands with us. We are drawn into his prayer. “Stay

with me (he says) until it becomes your heart's longing as it is mine." We have to grow into his prayer; grow up into his image and likeness.

Well, I don't want to be abstract or overly theological since prayer is the farthest thing from abstraction. My theology of prayer is really rooted in an early experience. I can tell you about the time I learned to pray. When I was in the 8th grade my very best friend in the whole world, John Hicks, was diagnosed with late-stage Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. I remember exactly where I was when his mom told me, and I still remember the punched in the stomach feeling I had when I heard her say "cancer." I went with John to his first chemo session, and when we got back to his house, to pre-empt the chemo, we buzzed his hair, and I buzzed mine too. Our entire basketball team followed suit. We were the Oak Mountain Eagles, but that year we were the Oak Mountain Bald Eagles. When he felt up for it, John would sit in the bleachers and watch us practice.

I remember coming home after basketball practice and just being so sad, and not being able to talk to my family. I'd go upstairs, shut my bedroom door, and fill up the bathtub and take baths until it was time for bed. And I'd just lay in the tub and pray to God. That John would be okay. I did it every night of my 8th grade year. We nearly lost John several times, but he held on. During that long season of cancer treatment John became very close to my family, especially my mom, who called him "Baby John."

Sadly, John and I didn't stay as close through high school. We didn't have a falling out or anything. Life just pulled us in different directions, and we went our separate ways.

Well, fast forward a few years. My junior year in college my mom was very sick. She had been sick on and off, and frankly, this time, after being there for her so many years, I felt overwhelmed at the prospect of going to class, keeping up my coaching, and caring for her. But I still prayed. I continued to pray. I really was praying for help.

I remember getting a phone call from our home phone number. I was surprised to hear John's voice on the line. We hadn't talked in years. He said, "Hey G (he always called me G), I heard your mom was sick, and I decided to come over. I know this is a lot for you, but I plan to come by as often as I can to check

on her. I'll keep coming until she gets better." We hung up the phone, and I cried like a baby.

Now, I have no idea if my prayers had anything to do with John living through his cancer. And I have no idea if my prayers prompted him, all those years later, to go over and sit with my mom. I don't know. These were complex situations, and a whole lot of variables at play. And why anything happens or doesn't happen is a great mystery. But what I do know is that those prayers changed me. My love for John, my gratitude for him, grew. I didn't know I loved him so until I looked back and saw the number of hours I prayed for him. My prayers gave me eyes to see and gave me words of gratitude that I'm not sure I would have had apart from those hours in the bathtub. I wouldn't be a priest; I wouldn't be someone preaching on prayer apart from John. I prayed then because I didn't know what else to do, and that's why I pray now, too.

It hasn't always been easy, but I realize now that prayer is not a way to buy off the Almighty; we aren't dropping our shiny quarters into the Cosmic Gumball Machine. Prayer is the place we can be honest about our longings, our hopes, and desires. We offer these not expecting to get something from God; no, but to give God ourselves, to place our hearts in those Loving Hands. And I think as we do this, we become more loving, more grateful, and more alive. And we keep on praying as best we can; we do so until we grow up into the Image of Jesus: until that day when prayer is no more, and we are embraced by the Love that holds us and all things in being.

