

**A Sermon Preached
at
St. George's Madrid
by
The Reverend Canon John W. Kilgore, M.D.
28 July 2019
VI Trinity Proper 12
Hosea 1: 2-10
Psalm 85
Colossians 2: 6-15
Luke 11: 1-13**

Lord, teach us to pray...

What a simple request: Lord teach us to pray. We are still doing that today. If you search Amazon it lists 109,000 books on prayer without going into specific subcategories. Likewise Google lists 34 million books on prayer. I once gave a series of Sunday morning adult forums on prayer titled 'Prayer: An Operator's Manual.' In my library there are numerous books on prayer – God, Prayer and Healing; Pray All Ways; Prayer and Praise; The Art of Prayer, on and on. Books and workshops abound on prayer and meditation. It is a big topic and sounds complicated.

When the disciples made this simple request, 'Lord teach us to pray,' they probably didn't get what they expected. The Jewish prayer of the day was quite formal and certainly engaging of a God they knew, yet addressed in a formal and proscribed fashion. That Holy Other whose name is incomprehensible and unutterable, whose name was not written. They left the vowels out; Yahweh the name for God then, only included the consonants YHWH all in capitals. And the Jewish style of prayer was formal. There was a prescribed posture, and a rocking movement, a position of the hands, donning a prayer shawl, fingering beads, all while wearing a *phylactery*, a leather cube on the arm and forehead that contains parchment with holy scripture from Deuteronomy and Exodus. And their prayers were considered more effective if they were prayed in a certain place, especially the Temple – even today, in the Jewish tradition, prayers are written on small pieces of paper, rolled up, and placed between the stones of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, also called the Wailing Wall, where it is believed that they find a shortcut to God.

But that is not the way Jesus taught the disciples to pray, when they asked. And not the way he teaches us either. Two lessons here — short, simple, direct; and frequent. Let's address the frequency first. Jesus knew how to pray. You will notice, if you go back to this scripture, that it begins, 'Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray..."' Jesus had already been praying, as he was wont to do. Holy Scripture tells us over and over that Jesus took time to pray, lots of time, and often went away to do so. He actually retreated much of the time to pray. And he also admonished us to go into the room and shut the door to pray, that we don't have to do it in public. So frequency is one lesson here.

But the second is simplicity. The Jews, and we must remember that Jesus and the disciples were Jews, had a more complex and regimented order for praying. But when the disciples asked 'Lord, teach us to pray...' Jesus made it quite simple. The Lord's prayer is short, simple, and direct, and communal.

Let's look at the Lord's Prayer. There are actually two versions of it in the New Testament. Luke's version has five imperatives, Matthew's seven. Luke opens, *Our father who art in heaven* in our traditional form, or *Our Father in heaven* in the contemporary version. This is based on traditional

Jewish prayer forms, the prayers Jesus knew. However, most often in the synagogue God was addressed as Our Father, Our King. Not the very familiar Abba that Jesus used. Joachim Jeremias writes in *The Central Message of the New Testament*: “To his disciples it must have been something extraordinary that Jesus addressed God as ‘my Father’ given the usage of ‘Abba,’ which is a child’s word for ‘papa,’ and, according to the Talmud, is used when a child first learns the taste of wheat and begins to be weaned from a mother’s nourishment.” He goes on to say that the word was used by Jewish children on into young adulthood as an endearing form of address. Jesus’ use of the word *Abba* in this setting was unusual. This familiarization of the addressing of God would have been quite a shift for the Jewish disciples.

Luke’s version next says, ‘hallowed be your name,’ acknowledging the holiness of God. This is one of the five things we ask God to do in this prayer. May your name be holy; your kingdom come; give us each our daily bread; forgive us our sins; and do not bring us to the time of trial. Pretty easy – five things: holy be your name, feed us (i.e. give us what we need), forgive us, and don’t test us, and your will be done. And then it ends, for the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. The Matthean version is similar, brief and to the point, but a bit different. It has seven imperatives, or requests, or commands if you will: blessed or hallowed be God’s name; God’s kingdom come; God’s will be done; feed us; forgive us; don’t tempt us; deliver us from evil. Simple and straightforward.

Basic and simple Christianity, capsulized, summed up. It includes most of the gospel message. St. Augustine wrote, “Run through all the words of the holy prayers [in Scripture] and I do not think that you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord’s Prayer.” Quite an interesting thought.

The Lord’s Prayer is basic stuff to us. Part of the core of our being. That basic foundation of knowledge in our lives. You may remember the other prayers you learned as a kid? *Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.* Or grace over meals. Bless O lord this food to thy use... But this is our most basic prayer, which we pray often. We use it in every Anglican worship service — Morning Prayer, Noonday Prayer, Evening Prayer and Compline, all of the services in what we call The Daily Office, include the Lord’s Prayer. As do Holy Eucharist, Baptism, Confirmation. All our services include the Lord’s Prayer. And notice where it is placed in the service. The portion of the service called The Prayers in Morning and Evening Prayer begins with the Lord’s Prayer before we add in those prayers of special request. The Lord’s Prayer is foundational.

One sermon resource says, “The Lord’s Prayer contains the whole of Christian teaching in code – just as the whole of a living creature is encoded in its genes. Every kind of prayer is found there, too, from sheer adoration to contemplation to penitence to petition, and the whole thing is intercession, since the petitions are all for *us* and not for *me*...”

That’s the other thing about this prayer. Notice that all the pronouns are plural. This prayer teaches us to pray for more than ourselves. ‘Give **us**, forgive **us**, save **us**...’ **us** not **me**. Contrast that with our children’s prayer, ‘Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.’ All about me. Not a prayer for a child that has not yet learned differentiation of self from the world. This is not a kid’s prayer. This is a mature prayer. And it captures really all we need to ask for. It says something about our corporate worship, our corporate nature, our being one body, as we espouse in the Eucharist. Whether we are praying alone in our room with the door locked, in the desert on retreat, or in church with many others around, we are praying, in the Lord’s Prayer, for all, for the corporate body. As we should. As Jesus did.

The Lord’s Prayer is comprehensive, yet simple. Martin Luther said “The fewer the words the better the prayer. To have prayed well is to have studied well.” Prayer doesn’t have to be complicated or long.

And let us not forget the other lesson here — frequency. The latter portion of our gospel reading talks about persistence and keeping asking. Jesus is telling us that prayer doesn't have to be complex or weighty or long, but it is to be frequent, as he demonstrated to us. Keep knocking and the door will be opened. St. Paul admonishes us to pray without ceasing.

So, in response to 'Lord, teach us to pray...' a simple formula in the Lord's Prayer, and a suggestion of frequency. How much easier can it be?

Amen.