From the Pulpit of
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, SARASOTA, FL

Teach Us to Pray

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Luke 11:1-13
July 24, 2022

Jesus, as he often did, went off by himself in order to pray. Sometimes he did this early in the morning. Sometimes he did this after some big events had taken place. John tells us that after Jesus fed the 5,000, people wanted to take Jesus by force and make him a king – an earthly king – so he went off by himself to pray. He did this often enough that the disciples took notice, and one day they asked him to teach them to pray, as John had taught his disciples.

Teach us to pray. That is often a request from people in the church to the pastors of the church. Prayer is one of those things that we say we should do, and yet it is also one of those things with which some people, maybe many people, are uncomfortable. In my long years of ministry, in every church there have been people who ask the pastor to open a meeting in prayer, because, they say, they are not comfortable doing that. So, the pastors often become the designated prayers in the church. And pastors are sometimes asked to attend a city council meeting, or some other civic function, to open the meeting in prayer. If the city council members really knew what they were doing with that request, or really understood what prayer is, I'm not sure they would ask the preachers to do that.

Teach us to pray. This is not going to be a "how-to" sermon, to give you a formula to use, or a pattern to use for prayer. If you want a pattern, look to the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew – adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication; ACTS for short. I don't think the disciples were asking Jesus for some pointers on how to open a meeting, or how to say grace before a meal. Teach us to pray, Jesus, the way you pray.

I looked on-line for "books on prayer." I went to several sources for this, one of them a leading Christian bookstore, and also Amazon.com. This is what I found in descriptions of some of the books that were the first ones listed. One of them said, "No matter how you read it, (name of book) will spark your creativity, nourish your soul, and give you the encouragement you need to become the person you want to be." What you want to be, not what *God* wants you to be. Another description said, "God is waiting to pour out blessings on your life, if only you will ask Him. God wants you to be a powerful prayer warrior and help you as you pray for the prayer requests on your war room wall." War room and prayer in the same sentence? And a third book description said, "You're guaranteed to find just the peace and hope your heart needs in 3-Minute Prayers for Difficult Times."[i] They didn't say "Guaranteed or your money back," though.

There are many other books, and I think most of them – the contemporary books, anyway – are more like programs or formulas, following someone else's thoughts and outlines about how to pray. They may sell a good number of books; I have no idea. But I'm not sure that Jesus would subscribe to their answers, to those formulas and programmatic thoughts.

In the gospel of Matthew, the Lord's Prayer is included in the Sermon on the Mount, and is a part of Jesus' teaching to the disciples and the people gathered together. It is good to study the prayer, to think about the prayer, to think about what we say almost every week, and some

people pray the prayer every day. I am also aware that if you were to really think about the prayer when you are praying it, you'll probably mess up the next line and people will wonder just why you don't know the Lord's Prayer that we say almost every week. So better to study it, to ponder it, to really pray it, when you are not a part of a group that is praying it.

Luke gives us a different version of the prayer, a shorter version. After Jesus says the first part of the prayer should be adoration – your name is holy – he says we should pray, "Your kingdom come." Your kingdom come. We say that almost every week when we say the Lord's Prayer, but I'm not really sure we understand what we are saying. "Your kingdom come" is a whole lot bigger and more powerful than becoming the person you want to be, or guaranteeing anything that is about our personal gain or fulfilling a personal want. Jesus calls us to the big picture.

Years ago a friend of mine, in a sermon he preached, talked about having a picture of the hand of God coming down from heaven towards us. In God's hands are pennies. We are excited to take a penny from Gods' hand, and then another penny, then another until the pennies in God's hand are in our hand. Isn't God good, we think. But what we did not realize is that God was not just offering pennies; God was offering God's hand, but we are content with the pennies. Jesus is talking big picture; we are often content with less. Your kingdom come.

Jesus tells the disciples about persistence in prayer, and then he tells them to ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you. Then he says – again, think big picture – how much more will God give *the Holy Spirit* to those who ask him. The kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit. That is big.

I am not saying here that we should not bring to God in prayer our personal needs, or needs of the church. I hope you have been praying for the Pastor Nominating Committee as much as I have been, which, I'm sure, is not as much as the Committee has been praying. I hope you have been praying for peace in this divided country, and peace in a war-torn world. I hope you are praying for people who are ill, or who mourn, or who are going through difficult times. I hope you are praying for people to wake up to the reality of climate change, that we are doing increasing damage to this planet, people are dying because of extreme temperatures and storms, and areas of this country and the world are in an extreme drought. And I hope you are praying that you would realize that you just might be the "someone" to do something about all of that.

What sometimes seems to be missing in the thought of "teach us to pray" is the fact that we are bringing our prayers to this God who is the Creator of all, whose love surpasses anything we can imagine, this one about whom the Psalmist writes, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth."[ii] In prayer we are coming before God who loved the world so much that God gave his only begotten son to the world in order to redeem the world. In prayer we are coming before God who raised Jesus from the dead, not only defeating the power of death but also telling the authorities that their attempt to silence Jesus' message of grace and hope, of mercy and compassion, cannot and will not succeed, and the truth of God's amazing grace for all people is stronger than anything – anything – the world can do to stop it.

Is there a sense of wonder, a sense of awe, that fills us as we think about prayer? Or have we reduced God to, as I'm sure you've heard the term before, a cosmic vending machine, where we put in our coins (prayer requests) push the button, and we expect to get what we asked? If we don't get what we asked (or perhaps demanded) we kick the machine once or twice, then walk away complaining about how we just lost $1.50 in that stupid machine, and we didn't get the M & M's that we wanted. We even keep score on just how many times God came through and gave us what we asked/demanded. Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, about the Holy Spirit,

about the power and the glory of God, about the big picture, and sometimes we don't acknowledge that.

Think of Isaiah in the temple when he has that vision of God, in chapter 6. Isaiah says "Woe is me, I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Think about Peter in the boat with Jesus, after Jesus teaches the people (this is in Luke 5). Jesus tells Peter to put his net in the water again. Peter says I don't think so, I've been out all night and caught nothing. Jesus says do it. Peter does, and gets a huge catch. He doesn't go for his calculator to tally up the profits for the day; he falls before Jesus and says, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Yet both Isaiah and Peter are raised to their feet, and are cleansed, and are called to new forms of ministry and service. They came before the holiness of God, and they knew it.

Do we know it? Are we really aware of just who it is before whom we come when we pray? Do we really understand "your name is holy?" Before we think about one prayer request, one need or want or hope to raise in prayer, are we aware of the powerful truth that we can come before this Holy God, this one so filled with love for us and for all the world? Teach us to pray may not just be "help us know some of the words to use," but "awaken us to the amazing wonder and glory of this God of love and hope and compassion and mercy and grace."

Are we aware of that big picture of the nature of God, of God's desire to give to God's people the kingdom, of God's desire to lavish God's grace, of God's willingness to give the Holy Spirit to God's people? Or are we caught up in smaller things – some of them very important things – when we think about prayer?

"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God almighty! All thy works shall praise thy name in earth and sky and sea. Holy! Holy! Holy! Merciful and mighty! God in three persons, blessed Trinity"![iii]

Let us pray.

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[i] From Lifeway resources and Amazon.com
[ii] Psalm 8:1
[iii] Reginald Heber, "Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God Almighty! 1827