

## *Changed by Prayer*

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Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. So I say to you, 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. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Luke 11:1-13

When I left my mother's bedside in California, this past Friday at Noon, her last words to me were, "See you soon." Her whisper was barely audible, but she mustered a smile and there was a light in her eyes that I hadn't seen for a few days.

Right away, I sensed that my mother's "See you soon." had two meanings. She had recently encouraged other visitors to come again, even when their visits, like mine, were very likely the last. A part of her may have imagined or hoped that I would see her again.

But my mother was also affirming her Christian faith. "We will all be changed," Saint Paul writes, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet .... For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality." (1 Cor 15:51, 53) I believe it was also with this faith in mind and heart that my mother said, "See you soon."

I'm sure I was predisposed to hear a spiritual meaning in my mother's last words because immediately prior she had given me a blessing. Sadly, I couldn't hold on to all of it, but I do recall how she concluded: "Mighty savior, safeguard this your servant Patrick. Safeguard him in every way. Amen."

This story is not meant to suggest that my relationship with my mother is or has been ideal. We've had our share of the usual parent-child dramas, including in the realm of religion. Just a few years ago, in fact, when I was in another parish, my hip-evangelical mother called me to diagnose what was wrong with that congregation: "You're still using a pipe organ, aren't you ... ?"

But it's also true that my mother first introduced me to Jesus. Thanks be to God. And her blessing as I left her on Friday was consistent with the tone and substance of many prayers I have heard from her and shared with her for most of my life.

My mother's prayers and her persevering in faith no doubt influence how I am now viewing this morning's gospel text from Luke. A disciple says to Jesus, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John [the Baptist] taught his disciples.' Lord, teach us to pray.

We may naturally imagine that the disciple is inquiring about *form*. "What words should I use? When should I stand, sit or kneel? Is there a best time of day? A better way to breathe? The old language or the new?" But these disciples of Jesus has already learned all of that. Most or all of them had likely been to their synagogues since birth. They had likely gone through whatever rigorous catechisms their local rabbis had mandated and their mothers enforced. They already knew their prayers.

With this in mind, I wonder if the disciple's inquiry was as much about *being* as it was about praying. You'll remember the scene in the home of Martha and Mary that we heard last Sunday. It

immediately precedes today's text. The disciple of today's query would have been there and noted the contemplation of Mary and the words of Jesus to Martha that Mary had "*chosen the better part.*"

And then comes the opening line of today's text: "*Jesus was praying in a certain place.*" Something about Jesus withdrawing for prayer, apparently alone, amidst so much there was to do, or something about his Peace when he returned from his prayers, may have sparked the disciple's curiosity. Perhaps by way of these moments and more a hunger had been forming in this disciple.

Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, "*The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.*"<sup>1</sup> Arguably, in today's gospel text, Jesus commends any and all endeavors to *influence God: ask ... search ... knock ...* But let's not miss how the disciple who asks Jesus about prayer may have been looking for that *changed nature* of which Kierkegaard wrote? "*How can my prayer bring me into a closer sense of direct relationship with the divine?*"

Some of you may know or recall and could tell the stories of saints whose natures have been changed by prayer. Maybe you noticed how, in prayer, they manage to be both reverent *and* familiar. Or maybe you and others observed how often their prayers opened windows of faith, hope and love.

Anna and Joachim, parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary, provide a sensible illustration today. Reading through the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of James*, one is struck by the centrality and urgency of prayer for each of them and for both together. When in desperation childless Joachim retreats to a deserted mountaintop, he clearly anticipates summoning the Lord there: "*I will not go down either for food or for drink until the Lord my God shall look upon me, and prayer shall be my food and drink.*"<sup>2</sup>

All this, and I haven't even touched on the substance of what we now call the Lord's Prayer. Each line is theologically loaded and worthy of our examination. Each line, also, arguably suggests and invites a change in the nature of the one who prays.

The very first word in the prayer that Jesus suggests here in Luke's rendering is *Father*. Jesus is not propitiating a far-off God. He is drawing near to the One *in whom we live and move and have our being.* (Acts 17:28). *Father*.

Soon Jesus prays, "*Give us each day our daily bread.*" All we have comes from God. And knowing and praying that changes us. Jesus is surely making a reference here to the daily bread given to the Israelites for forty years in the wilderness. They were instructed not to hoard it but to trust God's daily provision. In addition to other meanings, this line in the prayer may address and *change* our ungodly appetites for acquiring more and more and more than we need, today.

I could go on, of course, delving into forms and meanings, and perhaps with some benefit. I could also revisit an important theme in Father Lawler's fine sermon from a week ago, that true prayer naturally leads us to pursue change in the world for good and in the name of God. And more.

But I'm also cautioned by a recent episode with one of my mother's caregivers, a woman from a certain borough of New York—sensitive and hard-working but sometimes loud and a little coarse. During some moment when I was wondering aloud about how I was going to micromanage some aspect of my mother's care, she interrupted and said, "*Listen – Honey – you're totally over-thinking it.*" And she was right, of course.

With regard to today's text, all of it is worthy of our deep thought. It's also true that when it comes to prayer you and I can sometimes totally over-think it. And in so doing we can lose sight of the being of it, the spirit and intention of what I believe the disciple is seeking at the start of this scene and what Jesus offers that disciple, and us, in response.

Our own "*See you soon*" is coming soon enough. We may wonder if, when that time comes, we will be faithfully anticipating the coming kingdom of God to which we have drawn near in prayer all these years. We may wonder if, when that time comes, our prayers will have changed our nature, more and more, into Christ's likeness, and in so changing us also been a blessing to others. *Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> From *Purity of heart is to will one thing: Preparing for the Office of Confession*, first published posthumously, in 1938.

<sup>2</sup> From the *Infancy Gospel of James*, the Early Church Fathers, Roberts & Donaldson, eds., Schaff, 1819.