

**A Sermon for the Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
at St. John's Church, Norwood Parish
29 July 2007**

Proper 12: Genesis 18:20-33, Psalm 138, Luke 11:1-13

Jesus was praying, and after he concluded his prayers, a disciple asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." Jesus responded first with a short outline for prayer, then with a parable and finally with the assurance that God responds to prayer.

As Luke gives us Jesus' prayer, we see elements which in Matthew's account will have more of the familiar elements of what came to be known as the "Lord's Prayer." In English translations, Luke's account is typically rendered, "When you pray, say...", but it could just as correctly be, "When you pray you are saying..." Understood this way, Jesus responds, You know what to say when you pray: When you pray you are praising God, seeking God's sovereign rule on earth, relying upon God for daily sustenance, asking for forgiveness and making ready to forgive others, and beseeching God to be spared what you most fear. Instead of instructing his disciples in prayer, Jesus encourages his disciples to continue the patterns of prayer they already follow -- a pattern found in today's Psalm 138. Although we understand the "Lord's Prayer" as the quintessential Christian prayer, Jesus is affirming for his Jewish disciples, a thoroughly Jewish pattern of prayer. Even in the fuller form given by Matthew, and the liturgical form we use, basically from the *Didache* -- *the teaching of the 12 disciples* -- of several centuries later, the prayer remains a universal form of prayer. Any person, Jewish, Christian, other tradition or none, seeking to turn to God, can appropriate this form. The universality of this form of prayer is underscored by its use at the end of Alcoholic Anonymous meetings.

The more basic question may be, why bother? What does prayer, the Lord's Prayer, or any other prayer accomplish? God knows that God is holy, God knows our needs and fears; so what is the point of it? Wouldn't our time be better spent making God's Kingdom come on earth? ... That is probably the precise point. Prayer reminds us that we are not alone; and more fundamentally that we are not God. Prayer is the language of relationship between us and God -- whom Jesus tells us we can call "Father." No relationship exists without communication. It is as true of the relationship with God, as with good friends: you can go a long time without talking, and then pick up the conversation again, and it's like no time had passed. But it is also true, that without any conversation, without any communication, friendships, marriages, relations with family members, colleagues, neighbors, fellow parishioners, leaders and followers, all

these relationships will wither when there is no communication. An important element in the course of conversation over time is to take a break from the daily details to say how valued the other person is. Saying and demonstrating that the other person is valued, is an important reminder to us and to them, and recalling it, nurtures the relationship. And so it is in our relationship with God. Prayer, and worship, remind us of our relationship with God, what matters to God, and opens us to God's abiding presence in and will for our lives, and God's purposes for the life of the whole World.

But prayer does not always take the tidy form of the Lord's Prayer, or our elegantly framed liturgical prayer. Sometimes prayer is just laying out one's anger and disappointment with God. We see that in many of the psalms, "Oh Lord have you forgotten me," and in Abraham's quarrel with God's purposes for Sodom and Gomorrah from our first reading. Abraham had a nephew with a family in these cities, and he was concerned for them, and so Abraham questioned God's intentions. Surely there were ten righteous persons between the two cities. Abraham's nephew Lot, his wife and two daughters were surely not the only righteous ones? But then again, may be not. There's another prayer that slips quickly past early in our reading of the story: In the Hebrew, God speaks twice of "the outcry of her" which God has heard. In the Hebrew the outcry is singular and feminine. A woman has cried out to God of grave sin in Sodom and Gomorrah. The sin is unspecified here, but the Rabbis told stories about the arrogance of these prosperous cities, and how their leaders persecuted individual generous women who sought to feed the hungry and befriend those in need. One of those stories was about one of Lot's daughters:

She used to see a poor man groveling out in the street and she felt very sorry for him. So every day when she went down to the well for water she would secretly fill her pitcher with food and give it to the man. Soon enough, the people asked, "How does that poor man keep alive?" Then they found out what had happened and they brought her out for execution. The woman cried to God and asked for justice to be done to the people of Sodom. And God said – and here we rejoin the biblical text, "I will go down now and see whether they have done according to the cry of her which is come to me."¹

A cry for justice is also prayer.

In the parable, the persistent plea of the friend who comes at midnight is also prayer. The friend comes to ask for food for a traveler who has gone all day without food – no breakfast, no lunch, no dinner; therefore, the plea is for three loaves -- three lumps of bread -- the most simple hospitality, nothing outlandish

¹ H.N. Bialik and Y.H. Rawnitzky; *Sefer Ha-aggadah: The Book of Jewish Folklore and Legend*; Selected, translated and Annotated by Chaim Pearl; Tel Aviv: Dvir Publishing House, 1988. pp. 35-37.

about the request. Bread was both the basic sustenance, and the plate and utensil for eating any other part of the meal.

Jesus assures the disciples, and us, that even as parents know how to give good things to their children, even more so God the Father will respond to us and our prayers with the gift of God's own self. Jesus says that God will give the Holy Spirit to all who ask: God will give God's own abiding presence to all who ask. So come what may, whether our prayers are answered in the way we desire or not, we will not be alone. God will be with us.

I was certainly aware of this during my hospitalization. Although there were ten days when I was mostly unaware of my condition and what was going on around me and to me, there were other days when I was keenly aware. When I awoke from the anesthesia following my heart bypass surgery was such a day. I woke up in the recovery room, separated by curtains from four other people who were all much sicker than me. There was Jim to my left, Virginia across from me, Eleanor to my right and Maryliz across from her. I couldn't see them, but I heard everything. After awhile it occurred to me that I needed to be praying for them, just as others had been praying for me. From what I heard, it seemed doubtful that three of them would survive, but I was going to be ok. Did that mean that God did not hear prayers for them, but did hear prayers for me. No, that would make hash out of the Gospel. God heard all the prayers; God was with me in my time in the recovery room, and God was with Jim, Virginia, Eleanor and Maryliz as well. God was with us sustaining us all. I do believe that the persistent prayers for them sustained them for whatever was best for them next -- they were all still in the recovery room when I was moved back to a regular room. And the persistent prayers for me, sustained and helped move me through surgery, through that recovery room experience, and back to a regular room, and to the bumpy journey of convalescence.

Two prayers have particularly shaped that journey; actually they helped prepare me for the surgery and sustained me through the bumps of the journey which have followed. You will find them on page 461 on the Prayer Book.

The first, at the top of this page of "Prayer for use by a Sick Person" is *For Trust in God*

O God, the source of all health: So fill my heart with faith in your love, that with calm expectancy I may make room for your power to possess me, and gracefully accept you healing: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I think this prayer did, and continues to, help me have confidence in God's healing through all the delay and frustration and discomfort of recovery and convalescence.

The other prayer is at the bottom of the page. New to this edition of the Prayer Book, and written by Theodore Ferris, longtime Rector of Trinity Church, Copley Square in Boston's Back Bay, this prayer models a delightful candor for prayerful conversation with God *In the Morning*:

This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly. Make these words more than words, and give me the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

"This is another day, O Lord, I know not what it will bring forth" - what a great way to begin the day, because in the hospital you really don't know what the day will bring. There are days when it does take bravery to stand, when sitting quietly or lying patiently isn't so easy. And, days when doing nothing, but doing nothing "gallantly," makes for a good day; the prayer recognizes with good humor the gallantry of those days. Then we come back to the end of our Gospel reading, with a prayer for the Spirit of Jesus, for the assurance God's abiding presence through the course of the day ahead. With these prayers, I was ready for whatever the day would bring. Does prayer make a difference? I'm here to tell you prayer has made a difference for me. These are among those marked in my Prayer Book, I continue to offer them, and commend them to you.

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