



The Lord's Prayer



By Kevin Antonio Smallwood

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The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/2019-08-18-KAS.mp3>.

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JESUS TEACHES US HOW TO PRAY

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Recently, I was speaking with a friend of mine, who was sharing stories about his challenges within his work environment. He mentioned that he felt he was in a space where the motives of those in charge seemed to be from bad intentions, intentions that undervalue the dignity and respect of those who work for the company, and those whom the company serves.

I sat with him and actively listened as he expressed his deepest concerns and I could tell that he had been thinking about this for a while. He was deeply moved to frustration and confusion, so much so that he asked me a profound question. He said, "what do you do when you are confronted with the values you hold dear to your heart as they meet the realities of the world, especially those who seem to oppose everything that you stand for?"

I took a minute to pause, breathe, and think because his question was extremely nuanced, and yet the first thing that came to my mind was pray. Yes pray, it may seem like a simple, unsatisfactory answer for those who desire concrete solutions, but in reality, it is what I do, it is what we do, and what we must continue to do.

During this moment with my friend, who is a Buddhist practitioner, I began to theologize as to why I began with prayer as the beginning to a long answer. I do not work with my friend or those he is having struggles with, but I do know that often what we pray for, and the One to whom we pray, are the keys to getting our house in order for how we are to respond.

An easy response would have been to tell him that he should confront everyone immediately and let his concerns be heard, but the downfall would be entering into a confrontation, without a plan or a guiding light to true reconciliation. Acting without thinking, or in this case without praying, is like a bad improv-play that worked for a week or two, but had no true foundation to stand on and so the impact of its influence fizzled away. Improvising our responses to the dangers of the world and the tools of sin and destruction, can only get us but so far if we are not grounded in the way, truth, and life of Jesus Christ.

In the Gospel according to Luke, we get many glimpses into Jesus' own persistence in prayer; it is a way of life that he embodies throughout his ministry on earth. He often went up to the mountain to pray; he prayed before major transitions in life, such as the call of His disciples and even unto to death on the cross. He maintained his connection, his relationship with God as part of his daily life. If prayer was, and continues to be, a way of engaging with God the Creator which Jesus took upon himself to practice, and to live into, how much more can it do for us, the ones who continue to be the hands and feet that serve under Christ's ministry?

Prayer may sometimes seem like it doesn't work, we may have even expressed frustration with prayer as we wonder what 'thoughts & prayers' are going to do when we face the daily reminders that there are people in the world who are hungry not only for food but for justice. We may wonder what effects our prayers may have over systems and institutions that continue to divide our nation creating a false atmosphere of scarcity and fear. How are our prayers going to be received by a neighbor who needs shelter and a stable home to live in?

At these moments we may become frustrated with prayer, it may even, dare I say, seem boring and routine. The beauty of this experience is that it is not ours alone, for even the saints who came before us became frustrated with prayer, even with God, Jesus did too, but they did not stop. For it is in the persistence of prayer that the beauty of our relationship with God unfolds, it is in the intentionality of bringing ourselves to a state of being that requires us to humbly stand before God and to relate to Him. It is in learning how Jesus modeled prayer for us that God's faithfulness is shown and revealed.

This is what Jesus does for us today as he teaches the disciples what we know as the Lord's Prayer. This was the first prayer that I and many of us learned by heart, it is written in the back of an old notebook from grade school that I have, it is what Jesus himself taught us, and it is what we are soon going to pray as part of the Holy Eucharist.

When Jesus begins to teach the disciples this particular prayer, He begins with the word Father, which immediately brings us into an intimate relationship with God, for father in Aramaic means Abba, which denotes a specific kind of relationship, one of kinship and love between the One who created the stars, the heavens, and us. It is important to note that the word father, and mother, may be a tender spot for those of us whom may have lost our parents, or may have been estranged from them, or never knew them. As we journey into this prayer, we must remember that no human word to describe God is ever fully representative of who God is, and the closest we get to a word that brings us into the fullness of God is in the name of Jesus the Christ.

Entering back into the Lord's Prayer, we see that our foundation for prayer is in turning ourselves to God in a posture of a child speaking to the One who cares for us. Jesus is telling us that God wants to hear from us, She desires to hear the sounds of Her children's voices and to gaze into their thoughts. We first orientate ourselves toward God and then we pray that God's name is hallowed.

When something is hallowed, or sanctified, it is set apart from the norm to denote something of divine significance. In the hallowing of God's name, we are acknowledging that God is higher than us, for God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and God's ways are holier than our ways. This acknowledgment is then linked directly to God's plan for us and all of creation when Jesus says, "Your kingdom come." To pray for the coming of God's kingdom is to know for certainty that this prayer, and all our prayers, have an eschatological ring to them. The eschaton is the final event of God's plan, therefore in the Lord's prayer we are taught that God's kingdom is indeed coming to reality, even when may not see it.

This seems to be why Jesus then prompts to ask for bread daily, not only our essential need for survival, but Jesus Himself, the bread of life that nourishes us, guides us, and moves us to both prayer and action. This is where Jesus, without saying it, recognizes that we are in a dangerous and sinful world, and because of it we are in need of prayer, daily.

Jesus sees our need for faithful relationship with not only God but with others and ourselves, as He moves us into praying for forgiveness of our own sins and to teach us to forgive those whom have wronged us. At this point in the Lord's Prayer we have moved even further into relationship with God, neighbor, and self. We begin with God, we stay with God, and it is with God that we are changed within and given a gracious power to extend to those who have wronged us.

Much of our walk with the Lord's Prayer is about orientating ourselves, turning to God over and over again, from the moment that we rise to the moment that we sleep, and even unto the point of death. We can hear Jesus gently saying with an immense power of truth that our turning to God is what saves us from the time of trial, the time of judgment that we all will face. It will be a time when God's love and mercy shine so bright that all the worries of the world melt away as we stand in God's glory and truth.

The Lord's Prayer is one of great importance because it teaches us about the nature of the one to whom we pray, it says to us that it begins with God, we are forgiven and have the power to forgive, and it ends with God at the culmination of God's glorious plan.

What do we do with such a gift of prayer, well we pray, and when we need help we lean on others to teach us to pray, and when life hurts us we pray, and when life is good and joyful we pray. This is what Jesus seems to be saying to us in the parable of a friend asking a neighbor for bread in the middle of the night. Both the friend and the one in the house are persistence in their responses, but what Jesus leaves us with is that we shall ask, seek, and knock on the door that is a mainline to God; prayer.

During this summer as we have been journeying through misunderstood stories of the bible, prayer has been a key point in many of the stories, and today Jesus encourages us to do so. May we keep asking for the good things that only come from God, may we seek the face of Christ in our neighbor and ourselves, and may we knock, with faith, on the door to eternal life.