

## Lord, Teach Us to Pray

Sermon for 7-25-10

Scripture Psalm 85, Luke 11:1-13

Do any of you remember the Peanuts cartoon where Charlie Brown is kneeling beside his bed for prayer? Suddenly he stops and says to Lucy, "I think I've made a new theological discovery, a real breakthrough. If you hold your hands upside down, you get the opposite of what you pray for." Prayer is not magic. Or as another preacher<sup>1</sup> said, "Prayer must be more than an emergency magical lamp rubbed in a crisis." What do you believe about prayer? What do you think happens when you pray? Does God answer prayer? How? I'll come back for your thoughts in a few minutes.

Today I want to look at the Lord's Prayer as a guide to how we might pray as well as looking at Psalm 85 in light of prayer. Probably most of you here pray on a regular basis; however, many people do not pray. Sometimes it's because they do not know how; other times it's because their earlier prayers have not been answered so they give up on prayer. Now I do not believe that either of these reasons is true in the case of the disciples who asked Jesus to teach them to pray. I don't believe they were looking for a new technique. The request comes right after they observe Jesus praying. It was definitely a serious request. Maybe they had observed the intimacy Jesus seemed to have with God and wanted that intimacy also. Jesus called

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<sup>1</sup> eSermons for July 29, 2007

God “Abba” which most commentators say is similar to using the word, Daddy. Jesus gives his disciples and us simple, unpretentious language in which to pray. He doesn’t talk in some obscure, intellectual or theological terms. He gives us the words to say when we pray, and then he tells a story.

You know I pray a lot and still I’m not at all sure what happens in prayer or how God wants me to pray outside of the “Our Father”. I use to be pretty certain until I started listening to and reading Marcus Borg , who believes in a panentheistic God, not an interventionist God. Let me define those two terms as simply as I can. An interventionist God is a person-like being that is out there somewhere and comes when we call. A panentheistic God is an encompassing spirit in whom everything that is, is. This God is not out there, but right here all around us. Another way Borg describes this God is not only “right here”, but also “more than right here”.<sup>2</sup> He sees this type of God as a presence beneath and within our everyday lives. In this light, Borg doesn’t believe that God intervenes as in answering prayer. How could God intervene for some and not for others? This really makes a lot of sense to me but then what do I do with my long list of people to pray for as well as my own needs? I keep praying for them, lifting them up to God; sometimes asking that they be surrounded by light, asking that they be open to God’s will.

For me, praying, including meditating and contemplating, is also important for the intimacy with God that praying brings. I believe God

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<sup>2</sup> *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 66

wants me to pray, that it is a way of being open to aligning my will with God's will. What about the rest of you? Does anyone here want to share your thoughts about prayer?

Before looking more closely at the Lord's Prayer, let's go to Psalm 85. The psalmist is praying/writing in a troubled time in Israel's history, after a time of great glories. The nation is suffering and the people believe that it is because God is angry. The prayers are for God to show God's love, favor, and help once again. The situation of this psalm reminds me some of our own nation. We have had a few years of great suffering from real estate bubbles bursting to bank and auto failures, to great unemployment and a severe loss in assets for many people in our nation. And then most recently we have the oil spill and all the damage that is doing. Are we like the nation in our Psalm that has lost God's favor? What can we expect from God to solve our problems? I'm sure there would be many different answers among you. We are not a congregation that agrees on our theology or our politics. I was told that someone was upset that I did not say God bless America on 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Many congregations have a conflictual relationship with patriotism. I believe as Christians, our first loyalty or allegiance is to God not to our country. I feel very uncomfortable blessing our nation rather than our universe, our world. Even though I do not always support what my country does, it is still my country, and I love it. I especially love the freedom that we have and I wish all people could have that freedom. I love the opportunities I have as a woman—even though it is not perfect. I pray

that our country can improve in the way we care for the poorest of our citizens. And all of this is based on my interpretation of what Jesus taught—to love our neighbors close and far, to pray for those that persecute us, to refrain from violence and work for peace and to know that we are all God’s children, loved more than we can ever imagine and that God wants us to love each other. In Psalm 85 we are reminded to listen for discernment, for the call of God.<sup>3</sup> Our psalmist commits to listening to God in the midst of the difficult times. In order for us to discern, it is crucial to make a quiet space within which to hear the promises of God.

In the end of the psalm we have the promises that God’s faithful love will return and relationships will be restored-- righteousness and peace will kiss each other. How beautiful and how needed all over the world including our own beautiful land!

Back to the Lord’s Prayer. You may have noticed that this version in Luke is different than the one we usually say which comes from Matthew. It’s possible that this prayer was one that was familiar to Jesus as a practicing Jew. Listen to the Kadish from the Talmud that observant Jews were to pray three times a day: "Our Parent which art in heaven, be gracious to us, O Lord, our God; hallowed be thy name, and let the remembrance of thee be glorified in heaven above and in the earth here below. Let thy kingdom reign over us now and forever. The holy men of old said, Remit and forgive unto all men whatsoever they have done against me. and lead us

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<sup>3</sup> Mark D. W. Eddington in The Feast

not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil thing. For thine is the kingdom, and thou shalt reign in glory for ever and for evermore." <sup>4</sup>

In the Aramaic language, like the Hebrew and Arabic words have many different meanings. So, every line of the Lords Prayer could be translated into English in many different versions. By the way this is one of the problems in translating the Bible and believing every word literally. When we say the Lord's Prayer today, we will do one English translation; however, there could be many others.

After Jesus teaches the prayer he says <sup>9</sup>"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. <sup>10</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Then he tells them a story to illustrate how important it is to be persistent in asking for what we want; some translations use the word shameless. In Luke's version, we are told, "<sup>13</sup>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!" (rather than all good things which is found in the Matthew version). Imagine receiving the Holy Spirit in answer to prayer. What would that look like in our own personal walk of faith, and in the life of the community? How would we be transformed? So maybe the crucial thing for us to do in prayer is to ask that our hearts be aligned with God's heart so that the specifics that we ask for will be inwardly formed by

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<sup>4</sup> Translated by Christian scholar, Rev. John Gregorie

the Holy Spirit so that we can see our needs as the Holy Spirit sees our needs.

I imagine I have raised more questions than giving answers. We can't go wrong if our prayers talk to God about what Jesus talks to God about: the coming of God's kingdom, for our daily bread, and for forgiveness. And remember that when we have trouble praying, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with "sighs too deep for words." Even though prayer is a mystery to me in many ways, I feel confident that the "Still Speaking God" hears us and responds. My prayer is that we continue to encourage each other to be a people of prayer and faith. Thanks be to God! Amen and amen.

