



“Practicing Prayer”

Daniel 9:4-6, 17-19; Ephesians 3:14-21; Matthew 6:5-13

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Third Sunday in Lent

I grew up in a world formed and framed by prayer. In Baptist piety, prayer is as natural as breathing. Prayer was a way of life in and out of the church.

We prayed at church – often and passionately. Lay people led most of the prayers in Sunday worship. During the service, the minister called on various members of the congregation to lead us in prayer.

Each week we had a midweek service called “Prayer Meeting.” Members gathered to share their concerns with each other and to pray for one another. The prayers were extemporaneous and spontaneous. We held each other close.

Public prayer was normal, and those who prayed were fluent in the language of prayer common to our Christian tradition. Well-known phrases and words peppered the prayers of the faithful. A certain liturgical pattern organized their prayers.

Praying in public was a certain mark of spirituality and, often, a qualification for leadership in the church. Prayer was expected, regular, and rewarded with acceptance into the inner circle.

Such praying created a community of faith that was warm, nurturing, and filled with a form of spiritual vitality that energized people and the congregation. Prayer was part of our religious culture and knits us together even yet. Some of those dear people still pray for me every day.

On the other hand, our prayer tradition also encouraged judgment of those not fluent in prayer. The hypocrisy of praying to the audience rather than to God was always a present danger. The warmth of a close-knit congregation easily became a self-righteous exclusiveness that repelled outsiders.

We prayed at home more than we prayed at church. Every meal began with a prayer. Dad called on one of us to pray, and we never knew whose turn it might be. We came to the table with a prayer ready for use. Each night after supper we had family prayers. Dad read a text from the Bible and then we would get on our knees and pray. We went around the circle and all of us prayed every time. We children learned how to pray, and we learned how to fake prayer.

Gloria grew up in the same religious culture although her family was much less intense than mine. Among my favorite memories of her dad are his prayers. Gene was a skilled carpenter who turned his skill into a successful business. He was a leader in the community, well-known, and well-liked. He always prayed before we ate, and when he opened his mouth, love poured out – love for God and for all of us. As he aged, he often

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choked up when he thanked God for all of us at the table and for those of us not present. I miss him and I miss his prayers.

Having said all that and appreciating that rich heritage, I must tell you that prayer has never been easy or natural for me. I lack the fluency that seemed so natural to my parents. I learned the forms and language of my tradition, but the warmth, spontaneity, and intimacy that accompanied those prayers is missing.

That presents an interesting challenge for a minister! Praying in public is part of my job and, of course, I do. Praying in private is expected and I do pray for you, often by name. One of my assignments is to teach about prayer, and I do – but it's not my favorite subject or my favorite practice.

My discomfort is not prayer itself but the prayer traditions in the church that often seem more a burden than a gift. I still recall the great relief I felt the first time I taught about Jesus' teaching on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount – today's Gospel Lesson. As usual, Jesus is a radical reformer who punctures preconceptions, challenges old traditions, and offers life-giving renewal to our praying.

Jesus' religious world was even more formed and framed by prayer than the Protestant piety of my youth. Everyone was expected to pray at least three times a day. Prayer in that world wasn't spontaneous or extemporaneous. Prayer was a long, liturgical set prayer memorized and recited repeatedly. Life was lived with one's face toward God, a heart open to God, and a will obedient to God.

It's a rich and transforming tradition still alive in Orthodox Judaism today. On the way to Israel, our El Al flight stopped in Amsterdam. All passengers were sent to a locked and guarded room in the airport while the plane was refueled, and freight was loaded and unloaded.

It was early morning, time for morning prayers. As we waited, a young Orthodox man prepared for prayers. When his phylacteries and prayer shawl were in place, he asked an obviously secular Israeli woman to hold his prayer book for him. With great disinterest she held up the book while he rocked forward and back, chanting his prayers. I was fascinated by his very public faith.

In Jesus' day, rabbis taught their disciples how to pray and what to pray. John the Baptist, a popular and powerful religious reformer of Jesus' day, taught his disciples how to pray. Jesus taught his disciples – and us – how to pray. The contrast, then and now, is startling.

As usual, Jesus goes right to the root of the matter. He gets beneath all human prayer traditions and, to my relief at least, offers a profound and transforming alternative.

To begin with, Jesus declares that real prayer is quite different than most conventional wisdoms and human traditions. Contrary to what you may have heard, Jesus begins, eloquent public prayers are not necessarily real prayers. In fact, they are often prayed to the audience rather than to God, and are not prayer at all.

Once a Boston newspaper reported that a famous clergyman offered a public prayer that was the most eloquent prayer ever offered to a Boston audience. If so, the man missed the point entirely – and we often do.

Moreover, Jesus goes on, the length, frequency, and fervency of our prayers don't necessarily impress God, and shouldn't impress us either. Real prayer goes deeper than that.

Instead of all that, Jesus said, this is how to pray. We call it The Lord's Prayer. With the entire church, we repeat Jesus' prayer every time we worship. Some of us say his prayer every day. And there is more to it than often meets the eye.

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Notice the simplicity and brevity of The Lord's Prayer. It's only 71 words. It takes less than 30 seconds to say. It is in stark contrast to conventional prayer wisdom both then and now.

Jesus gets straight to the point because he knows from his own tradition that prayer is both deeper and wider than ordinary prayer traditions. The Hebrew words for prayer are simple and direct. In the Hebrew Bible, to pray is "to cry out," or "to entreat." The earliest prayers recorded in the Bible tend to be simply, "O God, help." Prayer is a primal human cry to God for help. It's the most basic form of communication possible. It doesn't take many words or much time.

Notice also that Jesus' prayer covers the basics in just a few words. It is a universal prayer. After the address, "Our father who art in heaven," the prayer is simply six requests. The first three are about God; the second three about us.

The first request or petition is "hallowed be thy name." Prayer begins (and ends) with the simple idea that God is God, and we're not! We cry out to the one who made us and the world and, therefore, we want to recognize God as great, glorious, and worthy of worship. Glorifying God is the ultimate form of loving God. And that is what we do when we sing hymns, listen to great choral music, give offerings, and read Psalms when we worship.

The second petition is "thy kingdom come." Oh God, please establish your reign of peace, justice, and righteousness in our world and in my life. Help us, O God. Take charge. Make things right. Push back evil, and establish all that is good. Thy kingdom come.

Then a third petition, "thy will be done on earth...." Here and now, O God, bend our wills and this world in the proper direction. We need you, please help. Make all that is good and godly come to our world – now, please.

The prayer turns to us. So, God, in the meantime, "give us this day our daily bread." Take care of our basic needs – and do not forget, nor let us forget, those who lack fulfillment of those needs. Help.

Petition five: "forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." What is a more basic human and spiritual need than forgiveness? We need to be forgiven. We need to forgive. Jesus links our forgiveness to our forgiving. Those who know the forgiveness of God will be so stunned by its unconditional and gracious character, they will be compelled to forgive each other. It's in the nature of forgiveness.

Finally, petition six, "help us in the hour of trial." On the journey we will pass through dark times and deep valleys. "Oh, God," we cry out, "help."

And we pray in this way because, "Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." So be it.

But the most striking and radical and basic feature of Jesus' prayer is its beginning. Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer bears the marks of liturgical usage in the early church. The language is the language of the community. Our father, our trespasses. Jesus' personal prayers and Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer both begin with the singular "father."

The word Jesus used is a family word in Aramaic, the language he spoke. The word is *Abba*. Roughly translated it means, papa or, perhaps, daddy. It is the language of intimacy and a child-like dependence. This God to whom we cry out is not just any God and certainly no cosmic sky god, far off and disengaged.

I may refer to your mother as mother. But I call mine, mom, sometimes mommy. The daddy of my childhood became pop in my adulthood. It was a relationship I had with no other. That is the language Jesus uses for God.

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Gloria always called her father “daddy.” And he always referred to her as “my baby girl.” It seemed odd to me at first, but that language described a very deep and rich relationship like no other. It’s not appropriate language except in the intimacy of the family circle.

I suspect my problem with prayer is a reflection of my father who always seemed formal, remote, aloof, and often stern. He did tell me I could tell anything and everything to my mom. She is the one to whom I cried out when I needed help. I suspect if I’d imagined Mom when I prayed, my life would be different.

Gloria trained our children well. When they were afraid in the night they invariably called out, “Dad.” I heard and I went sleepily, but gladly, to the aid and comfort of my children who mean more than life to me. I don’t suppose I ever changed anything deep in the night. But I was there, and from a child’s point of view, everything was all right.

The point is simple. Prayer is not about prayer itself. Prayer is about life’s most fundamental and primal relationship. God is like a mommy or daddy who wants us to cry out in the dark nights of the soul – and in the sunshine of our good days, too. When we do cry out to our daddy/mommy God, those cries alter the shape of our souls and change the landscape of our lives.

And it takes practice! Use the Lord’s prayer as a base for your cries, and repeat it and reflect on it. Have a family conversation with the God who is better than any human parent can ever be.

C.S. Lewis once suggested that we “festoon” Jesus’ prayer. Hang hymns, psalms, traditional prayers, from its six petitions. Some people write their prayers. In any case, prayer is the cry of a human child’s soul to the creator who is bound to us heart and soul.

Whatever you do, just do it. God can’t wait to hear from us.

Amen.