

Sunday, July 28, 2019
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 12 (Year C)
Genesis 18.20-32; Luke 11.1-13
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One day this past week, during the morning Groundlings Summer Day Camp staff meeting, Pastor Melinda asked one of the interns if she would close our meeting with prayer. Before the concluding prayer, the intern said, “let us be in an attitude of prayer.” Attitude of prayer? In that moment, the idea of “an attitude of prayer” struck me as a bit odd. Not that it was a new concept to me. I had heard the phrase before. But at that moment, it just seemed a little strange for some inexplicable reason.

Now, as I understand it, “attitude of prayer” implies placing oneself in prayerful position, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. To be in a position, a mindset, to be open to praying. I suppose, in its fullest sense, it would be about being in a position of being open to praying to God and to receiving whatever God wishes to convey back during our times of prayer.

Our Gospel reading for today opens with one of Jesus’ disciples saying, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11.1). Jesus responds with, “When you pray, say . . .” and then proceeds to lay out what we now refer to as the Lord’s Prayer. He doesn’t mean that when they pray, they are to only say those words. What he intends is that this particular prayer is a model for how they are to engage in prayer. The various phrases and petitions each convey a central component of what prayer should be about, of what prayer should include. Now, admittedly, the Lord’s Prayer as conveyed in Luke’s Gospel is a more truncated version of what is documented in Matthew’s Gospel, which itself is a little closer to the version that we pray every time we make Eucharist or pray the Daily Office. But what is recorded in Luke provides the basic structure and the key components of what Jesus deems to be essential to prayer. Those things that Jesus feels convey an attitude of prayer.

Jesus begins his prayer by addressing it to “Father.” The implication here is that, in prayer, the disciples are to approach God with an attitude of intimacy. The same intimacy that Jesus has with God. Not of addressing some distant deity, but of addressing someone who is beloved, such as a loving parent. That prayer is about entering into an intimate conversation with one we love deeply and who loves us deeply.

The first phrase of the prayer is “hallowed be your name.” This implies a recognition of the absolute holiness of God above all else. It implies an attitude of praise and recognition of the marvelous and fantastical works that God has done in creating all that is. Praise and recognition of all that God has done for us.

The next phrase is “Your kingdom come.” This is meant to be an expression of the desire that God’s Kingdom be brought to fruition throughout the world. That God’s deepest will and desires be manifest here and now. And along with that, the expression of desire that we be a part of making that a reality. That we seek to live as God would have us do.

“Give us each day our daily bread.” This is the first of three petitions specifically designed to express the nature of God’s relationship with humanity. In this first petition, we ask for “our daily bread.” Recalling the image of God providing for the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness by giving them manna—bread from heaven—this petition extends beyond mere bread. It is the willingness to ask God to provide for all our basic physical needs.

“And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” This petition contains a recognition that we fall short in doing what God would have us do, and asks that God forgive us of those failings. At the same time, we recognize that for the Lord to heal our own brokenness, to be open to the forgiveness that God extends to us, we must also be willing to forgive those who have wronged us. In this way, we seek to be in deeper relationship with God and with each other. As part of that relationship, this petitions is also a reminder to ourselves and a promise to God that we do to and for others as God does for us.

The final petition is “And do not bring us to the time of trial.” This is perhaps the most problematic for many people. I don’t know how many people have expressed to me the difficulty in praying this particular petition. I am often asked, “Why would God lead me into a time of trial?” Or in terms of the form more familiar to us, “Why would God lead me into temptation?” This petition is not about imploring God to not tempt us or to bring us trials. Because that’s not how God works. God does not purposefully throw trials and temptations at us to see how we are going to react. He loves us too much for that. Rather, this is a petition seeking God’s grace and God’s strength to withstand the trials and temptations that come at us from other areas of our lives.

The Lord’s Prayer is meant to be a model—a basic framework—for our prayers. That we are to incorporate these basic elements into our communications with God. Approaching God as a dear loved one. An expression of praise for all God has done for us. And a willingness to ask for help with our deepest concerns: our physical needs, forgiveness of our sins and for the grace to forgive others, and for help and strength in times of trial. But there is even more to this “attitude of prayer” that Jesus seeks to convey. He does this by following his introduction of the Lord’s Prayer with a couple of parables.

The first parable is about a man who goes to his friend because he needs three loaves of bread. The friend initially refuses because the hour is late and he and his family have already gone to bed. But the man is insistent in his request. The friend finally gives in, not because it is his friend who asks, but because of his persistence. This is meant to express the attitude with which we are to enter into prayer. That we are to be persistent in our prayers. Jesus summarizes this by saying “Ask, and it will be given to 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” (Lk 11.9-10). Further emphasizing the need to come to God in prayer boldly and with persistence.

Our Old Testament reading from Genesis further demonstrates this persistence and God’s receptivity to our persistence. God has determined to destroy Sodom. Not for the sin commonly associated with that city, but for the lack of hospitality on the part of its residents

(but that's a whole other sermon). Abraham implores God to save Sodom if 50 righteous people are found. God relents. Abram then proceeds to implore God to save Sodom for the sake of 45 righteous people. Then 40 righteous people. Then 30. Then 20. God is patient in Abraham's persistence and finally agrees to save the city if just 10 righteous people are found in Sodom. (Of course, the only righteous person in Sodom is Abraham's nephew Lot, and God does end up destroying it. But again, that's another story.) What is important here is Abraham's boldness and persistence as a demonstration of the manner in which we are to engage God. That we are to do so boldly, passionately, and with persistence. And that Abraham's bold bargaining with God is a model for the trust that we are to have in coming before God. Trusting that he will be open to hearing us. We may not always get what we ask for, but we trust that God at least hears us.

Back to the Gospel. The second parable that Jesus tells is a rather ludicrous illustration of how no one whose child asks for a fish would give them a snake instead. Nor would anyone whose child asked for an egg give them a scorpion instead. This demonstrates the absolute trust that children have in their parents to provide what they ask. This is the trust that we are to have when going to God in prayer.

Jesus concludes with: "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!" (Lk 11.13). If mere humans know how to give good gifts, we can be assured that God will give even more and better things to those who ask. The best thing being that God gives of himself in the form of the Holy Spirit to be with us as an ongoing presence, to guide us, nurture us, and sustain us.

Through his model of the Lord's Prayer and the two parables that follow, Jesus encourages us to approach God as we would our most intimate loved ones, and to pray with child-like trust, passion, boldness, and persistence. And that we do so with the confidence that God will hear and will indeed respond. Trusting that God wants only good things for us.

So, want to improve your relationship with God? Develop an attitude. An attitude of prayer. Be bold. Be passionate. Be persistent. And keep on praying.