

7 Pentecost  
July 27, 2025  
Psalm 85  
Luke 11:1-13

Two weeks ago we had the parable of the Good Samaritan, which taught us about the importance of living into God's grace. Last week, we heard about Martha and Mary, and about focusing on Jesus so we use our gifts rightly to best serve God and our neighbors. And this week, our Gospel talks about how to talk with God: how to pray so that we are in tune with God and what God wants of us.

And in some ways, I hate to even talk about prayer. Because when we talk about talking with God, when we talk about prayer, we run the risk of turning something that is supposed to be an integral part of our emotional and spiritual lives, something that comes from our innermost selves, into something that we feel has to have rules and regulations. And that can be deadly to our prayer lives, because there are as many ways to pray as there are people. We live in a both/and church: We value both individual prayer and corporate prayer. And sometimes we lose sight of the fact that they aren't the same thing. We all speak to and with God in our individual voices. And we are part of a church that values Common Prayer, prayer in community. So I'd like to look at what the Prayer Book says about prayer, and what the Gospel says about prayer, including what is probably the most well-known prayer in Christianity, to see how it might help us when we pray.

I'm going to begin by saying that prayer is really about communicating with God. That sounds obvious, but sometimes – especially for those of us who grew up with formal prayers, where the meaning can get lost in the form – it's a good thing to remember. For several years I worked at a church that had a day school, and one of the things I got to do was have chapel talks with the kids. Let me tell you, trying to teach preschoolers about prayer is not easy! You can't make it too simple – they're not stupid. But you can't go beyond their experience, either. And most of what they knew about prayer came from memorized prayers in chapel that they didn't generally take home and use in family settings, or by themselves. I ended up telling them that a good prayer contains four things: say hello to God; tell God what you're feeling; listen for what God says to you; and then say "thank you for being there, God." Of course, as we get older, we find other things to say as well, but a lot of the time, these four things are all we need. And notice that they're pretty much the hallmarks of a good conversation with anyone we respect and value. If you ever feel like you "just can't pray," I invite you to try this method and see if it works for you.

Before we get to the Gospel lesson, I want to look at the Prayer Book for a moment and see what it has to say about prayer, we who are part of a church that has valued common prayer for five hundred years. If you look on pages 856 and 857, in the Catechism, you will find seven types of prayer listed: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition, along with their definitions. It's good to know what the Church thinks about these types of prayers. And there are a couple of important things to remember. The first is that these categories are meant to be helpful to us if we want to use them. Humans like to sort things out. But that doesn't mean that this is the way God looks at prayers, cataloguing them as they come in and sorting them into appropriate pigeonholes. It's more the case that our prayers often blur the lines, or contain many forms of prayer at once, and that's fine. The categories in the Prayer Book are a way to remind ourselves of what we might want to say at any particular time. Sometimes we just want to say thank you. Sometimes we want to say "HELP!", for ourselves or for someone else. Sometimes we need to focus on being forgiven. The catechism helps assure us that no matter what we need, and no matter how we ask, it can be a prayer.

And of course prayers are the backbone of most of the Bible, not just the Gospels. Take a look at the Book of Psalms, for example, and see how many of them are prayers... and how different many of these prayers are. Our psalm this morning is a combination of gratitude for what God has done in the past and a plea for the future. Other psalms are cries for help, or lists of blessings, or even prayers for revenge. The psalms remind us that it's OK to pray in different ways when we have different needs, and this only makes sense. We pray differently when we're upset, when we're happy, when we are sorry and wanting forgiveness. Different needs mean many forms of prayer, or even no form at all. And all those kinds of prayer work.

Now, let's turn to the Gospel lesson. I invite you to notice that all the types of prayer that are listed in the Catechism are, in fact, found in the prayer that Jesus taught the disciples. We adore and praise God for who God is. We give thanks for our relationship with God and for the confidence that we will receive what we ask. We say that we are sorry for our sins. And we ask God to provide not only for our needs, but for those of the world.

And notice what the very first words are. "Our Father." This indicates that from the beginning, we are in relationship with God. And that's very important. But here's where our literary ancestors do us a big disservice. Because, as many of you already know, the word Jesus uses is nowhere near as formal as "our father." Rather, the word is "abba" – one of the first words a toddler uses when they begin

to talk. We might say “papa” or “daddy” in English. Jesus’ prayer tells us immediately that we are not supposed to stand far off from God like good little Victorians and say, “Please, sir, would you be so kind as to listen to me?” No, Jesus tells his disciples, and us, to address God in prayer with the same intensity, and the same intimacy, that a child addresses their parent. And this is borne out by the ending of our Gospel passage, where Jesus emphasizes the importance of persistence. “Ask and it shall be given you, search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened.” We are to ask and search and knock with the same persistence, the same single-mindedness, that a toddler uses when they want something.

Jesus lays out a model of prayer for the disciples and for us that not only encapsulates the essence of all Jesus’ teachings, it also includes everything we need, as individuals and as a community. First, we praise God, acknowledging that God is indeed holy and to be recognized as holy. Second, we surrender to God’s will – your kingdom come, not ours. Next, we are reminded of community – for notice that the word “I” never appears in this prayer. It’s us, and our, and we. We ask to be forgiven, as we forgive others, and we ask for our daily needs. Finally, we abandon ourselves to God’s complete protection and care. The theme throughout is not “please do for me what I want” but “please do for us, and through us, and in us, what you want.”

This really tells us all we need to know about praying, about being in the kind of relationship with God where we can address God as “daddy” – or “mommy” – and ask for what we need with the simplicity of a little child. We recognize the reality of God and the importance of God’s presence in our lives. We do our best to put God and God’s will first, rather than our own ... not only for our own sakes, but for the sake of the whole world. We ask for what we need, but without being greedy – for notice that we ask for daily bread, not enough to stockpile for the week. Why would we need to hoard what we get, to hide it away from others, when we know that God will always provide for us? We pray to be free from sin, as far as possible, and we ask for forgiveness in the same measure as we give it.

As Episcopalians, our peculiar grace – if I can call it that – is common prayer, not a single form of worship or strict adherence to the words of a particular creed. Worship and creed are important, but what binds us together is the act and idea of common prayer, lifting our voices together so that we become one in our relationship with each other and with God, and reminding ourselves that prayer is power, to be used for the common good, and not solely for our good alone. And we do all this so that, in the words of the modern theologian William Temple, “we may pass from faith that God will give us what we ask, to faith that what God gives us

is better than what we ask.” May our prayers, our praise, and our worship always remind us that God stands ready to be in relationship with us, offering us what we truly need, and leading us from grace to grace.

Amen.