

Shaped By Prayer
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Luke 11:1-13–July 25, 2010

What was the first prayer you learned? Perhaps you learned as I did, the children's night time prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. God bless mama and daddy...." Or maybe you learned, "God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for our food. Amen." If you did not learn prayers as a child, the Lord's Prayer may be the first prayer you learned. Can you remember when you learned the Lord's Prayer? How has your prayer life developed since the time that you learned the "Our Father"?

Just as we need to work up the dirt in the community garden to prepare it for planting, so we need to work up our hearts through our times of prayer and devotion in order to shape our lives in the ways that we are being called by God to shape them. The disciples did not drop their jobs as fishermen and tax collectors and etc., and immediately become the wise and knowledgeable followers of Jesus. Their formation into disciples took place over time as they spent time with Jesus, prayed with him, and watched him. Certainly, in order for them to leave what they were doing there was some glimmer of the truth in their hearts. John Wesley would have called this prevenient grace. That grace that shapes us in ways that cause us to want to lean in and learn more about God's word and God's plans for our lives, to learn more about being faithful followers of Jesus. Prevenient grace is, in my mind, the indwelling Spirit of God that makes us ready to hear God's word. Shaping Jesus' original twelve disciples took time and grace as does the shaping of all modern disciples of Jesus, as it does take time to continue to shape us into disciples of Christ.

Kathleen Norris, a Protestant author, in her book, "in her book *The Cloister Walk*, wrote about the ways that the Catholic monastic tradition provides a rhythm and depth for spirituality that many Protestants have never explored. When she says that the life of prayer works "the earth of the heart," she means that prayer is like the act of cultivation. In order to work the soil, one must break up the hardened

dirt clods, water the ground, free it from weeds and then plant a crop. Prayer is the way to "loosen up" the heart. During the natural course of our lives the "earth of our hearts" becomes parched, weed-infested and hard as flint. Unless we take care to break it up to run our fingers again through the rich soil that we know is there, our lives become as destitute and as desiccated as a desert."¹

Just as our work of cultivation changes the earth and allows us to plant and grow things that had not been there before, in a sense expanding what had been there before we started our work, so too prayer expands our capacity to experience God in this world and in our lives. And one of the best ways to work on that expansion is by studying the prayer that Jesus gave to us. St Teresa of Avila a 16th century Spanish mystic wrote that contemplation of the Lord's Prayer alone could bring us into the deepest prayer and union with God.

The disciples wanted a prayer they could recite, as it was the custom of religious teachers of the day to give their followers their own prayer. What Jesus gave to his disciples was less a commandment about what to say than a lesson in how to pray. He began, and here we will use Luke's version, rather than the more familiar version found in Matthew that we normally pray. Luke's version may be closer to the original prayer, scholars speculate since it is the shorter version of the two, and in its spare lines we can clearly see the points that Jesus made with his prayer. He began, "Father, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon." (NLT) (There is no soon in Greek) or "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come." (NRSV)

Jesus began with the admission that God is our father. This meant that we could have a close, loving relationship with God. God was not only a remote figure who was totally "Other." God wanted a relationship with God's children, a relationship that was mutually supportive and sustaining. We do not often think about the fact that God wants something from us besides our obedience

¹ William R. Long, adapting Kathleen Norris, "Teach Us to Pray," available at <www.drbilllong.com/lectionaryII/Lk1113.html>, accessed on 24 July 2010.

and praise, but by beginning this prayer with “Father” (Abba in Aramaic, Jesus’ language, or Pater in Greek.) Jesus is setting before us the idea that God wants a mutually supportive relationship with us.

Jesus knew that there were tyrannical, abusive and cold fathers. They existed in his time as they do in ours, but Jesus is declaring that we can know a loving, kind and non-threatening Father and have a wholesome, healthy relationship with God as Father. Jesus could have chosen to begin his prayer, “Mother,” but then as now although there are certainly tyrannical, abusive and cold mothers just as there are those hateful and hurtful fathers but sadly, the idea of a kind loving mother is not as countercultural as that of a kind, loving father. God the Father, can be a force for change in our world, reminding us that (remote male rulers, those men in power whether in our homes or in our countries) are called to be in relationships of support and mutual concern with their families and their subjects. When he gets to “thy kingdom come” Jesus continues his countercultural message since certainly the kings of his era and ours do not really want someone else’s kingdom to come to earth.

One of the ways that we learn to cultivate this relationship with our loving heavenly father is in the same way we do it with our earthly fathers if they are still with us and we are able to develop a good relationship with them , we talk to them, spend time with them, share our lives with them. By praying the prayer that starts, “Father” we are spending time with God. We learn even if we have not been so blessed on earth to have a mutually caring relationship with our heavenly Father. In addition, as Matthew’s Gospel makes explicit, this is “Our Father” not “My Father.” All the O-U-Rs in the Lord’s Prayer serve to remind us that we form this relationship with God in and through a community of believers, not in isolation, individually, on our own.

During our time of prayer, we are invited not only to speak with God, but also we are invited to listen. We are invited to listen as Jesus listened, actively, attentively, throughout his whole life. Prayer does not have to be confined, as many of you know, to one or two times a day, although it is good to have a routine time to pray. Prayers can also be prayed when we just sit and say, “Speak, Lord, I am listening,” and then we sit quietly. Prayers can be prayed while we are driving, while we are waiting in line at the

supermarket, as we begin a new activity during the day. Indeed our lives can become a time of prayer as we listen and talk to God moment-by-moment. This last week in VBS, while there may have been hurried prayers for guidance and assistance uttered in moments of concern, I would suggest that all the time spent with the kids at VBS was, for some, a time of actively listening to the voice of God in our lives. Whenever we pray whether loudly or silently, whether seated quietly or walking around, we are continuing to cultivate that earth of our heart, digging out the clods and clumps and making ourselves more receptive to the leadings of the Spirit.

Have you ever really tried active listening for any length of time? Now I am not talking about the kind of listening you may be doing now or the kind of listening you do when you are listening to a story that someone has told you before, but true active listening. It is hard work. To actively listen, a person needs to stop the talker every once in a while and check if what they are hearing is what the person has said. We don't mentally check off our own to-do list at the same time, or plan the menu for the next family picnic, we listen and we then repeat some of what the person said back to ensure we completely understand what that person is saying. Prayer, and especially the Lord's Prayer, encourages us to listen actively to God, to move closer to God through the petitions that follow the opening "Father, may your name be kept holy." (Or "Father, hallowed be your name.") Once we have declared our relationship to God and declared the divine nature of God's person, we move into the petition part of the prayer.

One thing we miss in the translation from Greek is that all the petitions are in the imperative. Jesus has a relationship with the Father that is strong enough for him to be able to use the imperative. We use the imperative tense probably most often with our children and our pets. "Come", "Stop that!", and "Get out of there!" In the Lord's Prayer the imperatives are: Holy (Sanctified)! Come!, Give!, Forgive! Lead us not! Once we have prayed a prayer like that to God, filled as it is with imperatives, we had better be prepared to listen, hadn't we?

Notice that Jesus' prayer is not filled, as our prayer concerns often are, with any requests for health. Certainly Jesus was not indifferent to people who suffered poor health, the New Testament is

filled with stories of Jesus' healings. But this prayer is notable in its lack of mention of illness or healing; rather what does Jesus focus his prayer on? He focuses it on the coming of the kingdom of God, not necessarily as an end time event; it is something we could help to usher in. He also focuses on our basic need for daily bread, and for the forgiveness of our sins. **We** are also promising to forgive the sins of others (and this verb is in the present tense, implying that we are to do it over and over again). In other words, not as we normally say it – “as we forgive the trespasses of others,” but rather “as we are forgiving (over and over) the sins of others. We are to seek reconciliation with each other as we seek relationship with God. “As we develop an increasing sense of closeness to God, we tend to open our lives more fully to God. Along the way, we develop increased patience and understanding.”²

In other words, rather than focusing on our own or our close friends and relatives immediate needs and (perhaps) wants, Jesus focuses us on our basic needs and the development of our relationships with God and with other people. He gives us both a broader and a narrower focus for our prayers.

Finally, Jesus ends by having us admit our weaknesses, admitting our fear of being subject to trials and temptations – both our fear of being subject to trials and our weaknesses at succumbing to temptations. We end in humble acknowledgment of our weaknesses, asking God for mercy on our lives.

This passage from Luke continues with further instruction on prayer, and finishes with the promise that this way of praying will bring us the Holy Spirit, if we ask. The Apostle Paul spoke about the way in which the Holy Spirit helps us to pray by saying, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

(Romans 8:26, NRSV) Even if we do not know how to pray, the Spirit will help us with those prayers.

But to help us in knowing how to pray, the parable of the neighbors is told next in Luke. Neighbor 1 has unexpected visitors arrive at midnight. It would be important for the host to provide food to his visitors but he did not have any bread, a necessary component of any meal at the time. In order to

² David Hart, *Christianity: A New Look at Ancient Wisdom*, (Kelowna, Canada: Northstone Publishing, 2005).

preserve his honor as a host, Neighbor 1 goes to Neighbor 2's house in the middle of the night, perhaps because he knew N. 2 had bread, to borrow some. Now getting up in the middle of the night would entail disturbing the whole family who likely slept in the same room, perhaps the same bed, and unbarring the door, which might have been a rather difficult chore, and then, of course, getting the bread. Everyone in N. 2's house would have been awake by the end of this activity. The words "shameless persistence" seem to belong to Neighbor 1 who was shamelessly persistent in knocking on the door, but the word, actually best translated shamelessness or non-shame, could actually have been applied to either neighbor – the sentence is unclear. Perhaps it was N. 2 who got up to answer the door only because he feared being shamed in front of his neighbors. In their society it would have been a serious loss of honor – a shameless act – to refuse to give a neighbor bread for his visitors. Perhaps the language was intentionally vague so that we could apply the noun to both neighbors. Just as it would be shameful for God to ask us to pray and then refuse to help us in our need, so it is shameful for us to fail to persistently ask God for what we need, for failing to rely on God's grace as completely as we would rely on a neighbor to give us assistance. We are to be shamelessly persistent in our prayers and God is to be shamelessly persistent in answering them, which does not mean, as we all know, that we will get exactly what we ask for, God is not a vending machine into which we can put our prayer coins, after all.

Brian Stoffregen, a preacher and commentator, wrote that our "prayer is not putting coins in a vending machine."³ God is not our divine vending machine, promising to dispense the item of our selection, if only we deposit the right kind or amount of money (prayer). Prayer is one of the ways we maintain a relationship with God. Now some of you may have a close personal relationship with your favorite vending machine, you may persistently visit the vending machine, issuing orders to it as you put your money in the slot. But I imagine none of you practices active listening with your favorite vending

³ Brian Stoffregen, *Exegetical Notes Luke 11:1-13, Proper 12-Year C*, available at <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke11x1.html> accessed on 24 July 2010.

machine! At least I hope you don't listen any longer than it takes the item to clunk to the bottom of the machine!

Jesus taught us that if we come to God with prayers in which we seek to establish a relationship with God, if we are persistent, and if we express our own willingness to be in relationship with others, God will be with us. In our time of prayer, if we seek to open our hearts to see as Jesus saw, we will be shaped by our prayers. “For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Luke 11:10, NRSV) “As Jesus teaches us to pray, with our lives as well as our lips, we are invited to see the world as Jesus sees – the world’s wounds as opportunity for healing and reconciliation, the world’s needs as opportunity to experience God’s generosity afresh by participating in its expression toward the poor, an account of deserving as a measure of just how much God’s loves exceeds such reckoning.”⁴ We will be shaped by the prayers of our hearts; our lives will be formed in God’s image through the prayers we utter and through our relationship with God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit as we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray. ...

⁴ Sarah Dylan Breuer, “Dylan’s Blog,” available at <www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2007/07/proper-12-year-C.html>, accessed on 24 July 2010.