

“Teach us to Pray”
Colossians 2:6-19, Luke 11:1-13
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“Lord, teach us to pray!” This is what the disciples say to Jesus in our Gospel reading from Luke. When you stop to think about it, you might wonder why they wanted a lesson on prayer. I wondered about that when I remembered that the disciples were faithful Jews who had been shaped by a religious tradition that included plenty of prayer. Jewish people prayed together regularly during corporate worship in the synagogue. They were instructed to pray throughout the day—morning, noon, and evening, and on special occasions they prayed special prayers for those occasions. It’s not like prayer was a novel concept. It would be like you and me - people who regularly join our voices in prayer in worship; people who have at least one or two mealtime prayers memorized and ready to go; people who know how to pray, “thank you, Lord,” and “help me, Lord” – it would be like us going to Jesus and saying “teach us to pray.” We may not claim to be *expert* prayers or the most eloquent, but we do have experience as pray-ers, and so did the disciples so what was there to learn? Why were they asking Jesus to teach them to pray? Well, we look to the text for a clue.

The clue about the reason why they would have asked Jesus to teach them about prayer is in the mention of John teaching his disciples to pray. It was standard practice for a rabbi to teach his disciples to pray so the disciples were just asking Jesus to do what any rabbi would do for his disciples, but there is more to it than that. There was a reason why rabbis taught their disciples to pray, and if we understand something about why the rabbis taught their disciples to pray in the way that they did that helps us understand why the disciples would have asked for this instruction.

Prayer is mysterious and one of the ways that we often try to demystify it is by saying, “it’s just talking to God. You can just talk to him, just like you would talk to the person sitting next to you. You don’t have to follow any special formula or use special words. Just talk to God. Pour out your heart to God.” All of that is true, and especially for those of us who learned to pray in protestant churches, this is the kind of prayer we’re most accustomed to. We may have a few memorized prayers, “Now I lay me down to sleep... God is great God is good let us thank him for our food...” but for the most part, we kind of wing it, right? I wing it when I’m up here doing the prayers of the people on Sunday, or if I visit you in the hospital or pray with you over the phone I’m generally flying by the seat of my pants. Hopefully I’m being led by the Spirit too, but, still, I’m relying on the Spirit to lead me in the moment.

Talking to God in prayer about whatever comes to mind is a legitimate way to pray, and by talking to God regularly and openly we can develop a more intimate relationship with God. That has value, but something that those of us who mostly pray in our own words may not think much about is that there is also value in praying prayers that we didn’t come up with ourselves. Praying a prayer that doesn’t originate in our own minds can help lift us above our own thoughts and feelings where we can sometimes get stuck. It can get us talking to God about things that we might not normally get around to talking to God about on our own, and if we keep praying the same prayer over and over again, it has the power to shape who we are and who we are becoming. I’ll give you an example from my own experience.

Our denomination has a wonderful little daily prayer app that you can download on your phone (I recommend that you do!), and it provides prayers and Scripture readings that you can pray and read every day. It’s not always a daily habit for me to use the daily prayer app, but sometimes I will use it for a period of time. The first time I tried this

was back in the dark ages before there was an app on my phone for this, and I had to use the bound and printed copy of the Book of Common Worship which also includes the daily prayer guide. For days and weeks in a row, I followed along and prayed all the prayers that were already written down right there, and one day, suddenly, I realized that something seemed different. I realized that I was feeling more confident about what God was doing in the world, and I was feeling more hopeful. I realized that I wasn't just praying about my own worries and concerns, but I was praying and caring about people in Africa, and the church in Europe, and farmers who were laboring in fields around the world. I was genuinely taken aback for a moment. What had happened to me and to my prayers? Then I realized what had happened. As I had been regularly praying the pre-formed prayers, many of them based on Scripture, I was being formed. I was being formed into a person who was growing in my faith and convictions. I was being formed into a person whose focus was shifting more and more away from myself and more toward God, and toward more of God's people, and more toward God's activity.

This is the power that lies in "premade" prayers, and that is why when a rabbi taught his disciples to pray, he would teach them, like Jesus taught his disciples, specific prayers that could be memorized and repeated. It was because they believed that praying was important for the formation of their disciples and formation was the goal. That's what Jesus's disciples were there for. They were following him because they wanted to learn *from* him and because they wanted to *be* like him. They wanted to join in on what he was doing, and, getting back to the question of why they wanted Jesus to teach them to pray, I think this was the reason. They weren't looking for another prayer to say at meals. They were looking for something that would help them in their journey to become more like their teacher, something that would help keep them faithful and focused, and prayer was that something.

Jesus was probably delighted to hear his disciples coming to him with this request. He wanted his disciples to be formed and faithful probably even more than they wanted it for themselves, and the fact that they were asking for this instruction, this tool that could help them be more for him, and with him, and like him, was a sign that they were taking Jesus and all the things he'd been teaching them seriously. It was evidence that they really were all in as much as they knew how to be, and like a good rabbi, Jesus was ready with an immediate answer to their request. He teaches them how to address God and what to ask for, and he teaches them to pray persistently and with confidence. I love, by the way, how Jesus's immediate answer to their request actually illustrates the point that he makes in the last part of the reading about asking and receiving. When we ask God for good things – like, show me how to be like Jesus, or help me help build your kingdom- those are prayers that God who gives good things loves to answer.

I said at the beginning that the disciples asking Jesus to teach them to pray was sort of like a group of people like us making that same request. "People like us" meaning people who have been taught by our own religious tradition to talk to God and who do already practice talking to God in prayer. I realized as I thought about it this week, that I'm not sure I have ever specifically asked Jesus to teach me to pray. Granted I already know the prayer that he taught his disciples when they asked, and you do too, so maybe we don't need to ask again for the words to pray or even for the instruction about how to pray with persistence and confidence. Jesus has already given us the instruction, but maybe I do (and we do) need to hear the lesson about why praying as Jesus taught us to pray is important. Maybe we need to hear that Jesus wasn't just throwing out some words for us to repeat mindlessly once a week at the end of the prayers of the people. Maybe we need to hear today that Jesus was giving us something that has the power to make us more like him the more we do it, and has

the power to keep our affections and intentions focused on Jesus, and has the power to keep hope alive in our hearts as we labor in a hurting world, and has power to inspire us to keep offering ourselves as servants who are dedicated to building and sharing his kingdom.

The truth is that it can be hard to stay focused on Jesus, and on our own spiritual growth, and on hope, and God's mission. When I first read this Gospel text this week, the thing that caught my imagination right away was the parable about the persistent man asking for bread. It got me thinking about where I experience persistence in my life, and the answer is everywhere. Bad news about distressing things happening in the world appears on my phone without reprieve. Ads that pop up in the newsfeed on my phone are relentless in telling me I lack something and in pushing products and things that promise to make me or my life better in some way. The culture persistently pushes us to embrace and celebrate individualism and make ourselves the center of everything. This is just the spirit of the age and the forces that surround us, but the scary thing is that it is often forming us in ways that we don't even realize. Without even noticing we are being influenced to be *less* like Jesus, and less hopeful, and less caught up in God's mission.

On Friday and Saturday, I spent some time pulling weeds in the beds in front of our house. We have these plants that look kind of like long grass. I hadn't been paying attention to them at all, and recently I realized that they were being overtaken by grass and weeds. There are 4 plants, and I ended up pulling out an entire large yard bag's worth of weeds. My neglect of our plants illustrates how weeds that weaken our faith, and our commitment, and our focus on Jesus can grow up and fill our lives without us even noticing because we just aren't paying that much attention like I wasn't paying attention to my plants. This has been the struggle for God's people forever. It's why Paul wrote in his letter to the Colossians, "As you ... have received

Christ Jesus the Lord, *continue* to walk in him,⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. ⁸Watch out that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental principles of the world, and not according to Christ.” This was a community of believers who were under pressure from forces that were trying to influence them with teachings and practices that threatened to lead them away from Christ and the Gospel, and Paul was urging them to pay attention and keep holding on firmly to the truth that they first believed.

Like God’s people in other times before us, we do experience pressure and temptation. Jesus knew that his disciples would which is why he taught them and why he has taught us how to pray. It is a serious prayer, and I believe that Jesus seriously means for us to pray the words that he taught us with the persistence and confidence that he taught us to have, on a regular, even daily basis. My challenge for you today is a challenge to do just that. Take time every day to quiet yourself, and pay attention, and then pray the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray. Trust in the process and commit yourself to the process of formation that can happen through prayer and see what changes it makes in you – in your thoughts, and actions, in your faith, and in your love for God and other people. I want to be a faithful follower of Jesus. I want to be more like him. I want to be used more by him. I want to remain firm in my faith convictions. I want to have hope and share hope with others, and if praying the prayer that Jesus taught me can help me with all of that, that’s how I want to practice praying. If you want those same things, take Jesus at his word and you pray the way he taught us to pray, too. Amen.

