

A worship bulletin is often called the “order of service” or the “order of worship”. The word “order” is used intentionally and is meant to convey that worship has a particular pattern or rhythm. It’s not random. In the Episcopal Church, our order of worship says a lot about our theology and what we believe.

For instance, the prayers of the people are not said until God’s Word is heard and proclaimed. The fundamental belief here is that prayer is done as a response to God’s Word. Pastor and biblical scholar Eugene Peterson said it like this, “Prayer is the response to God’s initiative, not the starting point.”

The belief that prayer is initiated by God’s Word is also revealed in the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament. Often called the Jewish hymnal or prayer book, the psalms are responses to God’s Word. And that is the reason we don’t conclude the psalms by saying, “The Word of the Lord.” The psalms, after all, are essentially the prayers of the people. They are our words back to God in response to his Word.

Ultimately, God’s Word opens our hearts and our imaginations to what is possible in the kingdom established by and through Christ our Lord. God’s Word gives us the faith to trust that with God nothing is impossible. God’s Word gives us permission to be persistent in prayer just like the friend in today’s parable is persistent in his asking for help.

If we are not inspired first by God’s Word, which gives us the vision of that heavenly kingdom, our prayers are likely to be too small and even distorted. Without the vision of that heavenly kingdom, our prayers are in danger of conforming to our earthly kingdoms, which are so often ruled by selfish desires instead of God’s most gracious will – a will revealed most fully in Christ crucified, in the One who came not to be served but to serve.

Think about praying without the vision of God’s kingdom like this. Imagine you are looking to buy your first home. You have a general idea of what your ideal house will look like. You are looking for a 3/2 that is close to 2,000 square feet. You’d like to have a screened in porch and a two-car garage. You want a master bedroom with a walk in closet.

But before you’ve actually found and purchased your first home, you start shopping for furniture. You buy a patio set that is perfect for the 500 square ft. screened in porch you have in mind. You purchase an in-home golf simulator that can be set up in the garage.

You go to the mattress store and buy a California King for the master bedroom. And you get a 72-inch television for the den. These seem like great purchases until you find the home you can afford in the neighborhood you can afford. Turns out you can only afford a 3/1 that is less than 1500 square feet.

Instead of a screened in porch, you have a back patio that is about 100 square feet. The garage can only fit a single-car and that is assuming your car was made in the 1950s. There is no storage in the house, so you’ll have to use the garage – no golf simulator. The California King is as wide as the bedroom, and the massive television you bought will only fit on the wall that you first see when you walk into the house.

Suddenly, these purchases don’t seem so great given the current reality. You can’t believe you threw away the receipts. Even worse, the time frame for returns has closed. You can’t even get store credit. You’ll have to try and recoup some of your money on Facebook Marketplace or eBay. If that doesn’t work, then you suppose you donate the items to the local church in order to benefit community outreach. If only you knew what the house looked like before you bought all that furniture.

Despite the best of intentions, prayer without a vision of the heavenly kingdom leads us to ask for things that might seem good but really have no room in the kingdom of God. When we don't have kingdom vision, we are liable to ask for things that are incompatible with what God hopes to accomplish in this world. We are liable to pray, "my will be done" instead of "thy will be done." We are liable to love our idealized version of the world more than our God given reality.

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns that when people put their own idealistic expectations on community, they are likely to destroy community. Our idealistic expectations will demand the community conform to our own personal vision – a vision that is clouded by sin and selfishness. We will grow judgmental. In the process, we will end up building something that is contrary to Christian community. Therefore, prayer must only be a response to God's Word.

In your own prayer life, you might ask, "Are my prayers calling on God to reveal his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven? Are my prayers making space for Christ to build up his kingdom?" or "Are my prayers calling on God to support my own idealized version of what I think the Church should look like?" Am I supporting God's project? or am I asking God to support my project?

One of our concluding collects, which sums up the prayers of the people, asks, "help us only to ask only what accords with your will." If you are worried that you might not always pray what is in accordance with God's will, let me help you with that. You don't. I don't. Even Jesus doesn't always ask for those things that align with God's will, which kind of sounds funny since Jesus is God. And that's part of the mystery of faith.

The good news about our ignorance in prayer is that God doesn't need exact change. God is not a vending machine. God is not going to spit your prayers back out if they are torn or crumpled or upside down. God can handle it if your prayers don't always align with his will. God, after all, is sovereign.

Ultimately, prayer is not about getting from God what we want. Rather, prayer is about learning to trust God even and especially when we don't get what we want. Prayer is about growing in relationship with a God who knows our needs before we ask. Praying is about growing to trust that God's ways are better than our ways even when it looks like all is lost. The cross, after all, is not a dead end but the gateway to life.

Even our most faithful saints, didn't always pray in ways that aligned with God's will. And 99% of our prayer life is knowing that our prayers don't and won't always align with God's will, that they are often clouded by our sin and selfishness. That doesn't make us unfaithful. It just makes us human.

Our prayers are not the gospel truth. Rather, our prayers reflect our faithful yet feeble attempt to repeat back to God what we think we've discerned from his Word. And through that constant call and response between God, ourselves, and the Church, our vision and our participation in the kingdom of heaven becomes more and more visible in a world that is doing it's best to make that kingdom invisible, or even worse, a world that is doing its best to convince us that true life is found in the kingdoms of this world.

In a world that tempts us to build our own kingdoms, may we boldly pray, “*Thy kingdom come.*” In a culture where our selfish desires are all too often our ruler and master, may we boldly pray “*Thy will be done.*” In a society whose priorities are out of order, may we be bold to pray, “on earth as it is in heaven.”

May God’s Word order your prayers and the prayers of the Church, and may the vision of Christ’s heavenly kingdom become so clear that we become persistent, even bold, in asking for those things that make God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.