

In the coming weeks, we will be examining the Lord’s Prayer and seeking out the foundations and meaning within it for our life of faith. Jesus prefaces his teaching of the Lord’s Prayer by giving some instructions for how to pray. This is spoken in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. This is not a mistake because prayer is central to our lives as followers of God and Christ.

Throughout the Gospels, we see examples of how central prayer is to Jesus. He goes away for long periods of time to pray (Luke 5:16). He calls the disciples up to the mountain to pray before the Transfiguration. He asks them to surround him with prayer on his last night on earth in the Garden of Gethsemane. We begin to see that Jesus depended upon the act of prayer to do what he did and say what he said. When we look at these introductory words before the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus is telling us to pray in the way he prays.

I sometimes think we have an impression that Jesus sprung from the ground, with no history or background, a completely new thing in the world. This is not the case at all. Jesus is lifted up by thousands of years of Jewish history and thought. He stands on a temple built by Moses, Joshua, kings like Solomon and David and the Prophets. When we listen to Jesus’ words, we need to understand them in this greater and deeper context. And so, when we look at the Lord’s Prayer, there are resonances and echoes stretching all the way back to the creation of the world itself, all the way back to the years of the Hebrew people in the desert, and back into the prayers of those who have gone before him.

We have a record of many of those prayers in the prayer book of the Jewish people, which is the Book of Psalms (actually, it is 5 books). When I went down to St. Joseph’s Retreat Center, down in Biddeford, I got to sit with the nuns during their daily services. Every month they sing, speak and chant their way through the entire book of Psalms, all 150 of them. The Psalms become the touchstone to prayer for them. This is a regular practice in monastic settings. One of my pastor mentors, Bill Rafuse, in Grand Rapids, MI, reads 5 Psalms a day, which means he reads them like the nuns and monks in monasteries around the world, leaving at least 2 days to read through the longest Psalm, 119.

But let’s back up. Part of what Jesus is doing in teaching the Lord’s Prayer is teaching *what prayer is*. The Lord’s Prayer itself outlines what prayer is, and it is built on a form which would have been very familiar to those who were listening to Jesus on the mountain all those years ago.

Jesus tells the people that, more than anything, prayer is not a performance. It is not a performance for other people that we do on public street corners or in front of government buildings. And it is not a performance for God by showing God how poetic and flowery your prayers can be. Instead, **prayer is about beginning a relationship with God**. It is a personal relationship and an intimate conversation. We gather ourselves in prayer by acknowledging a relationship with the One who created us, the One who provides for us and the One who saves us. All relationships begin with an assumption of trust. Or to put it another way, no relationship is possible without the assumption of trust. This is why Psalm 25 begins, “*To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I put my trust.*” And this is why, every Sunday, we begin our prayer together the same way: “*Our Father, who art in heaven...*” We begin our prayers to the Lord by acknowledging our relationship with God.

The challenge with any relationship is getting to know the other person. Is this someone I can trust? Is this

someone who will take my interests into account, or will they simply use me for their own ends? How much should I share with this person? The challenge is heightened with God because it seems as if, at least in the beginning of this amazing relationship, that God is not there, that God is absent somehow.

My prayers aren't being answered. My life isn't changing. God isn't doing what I told God to do. Therefore, God must not be there. A couple weeks ago, I saw someone who never comes to church. She said to me, "*Your prayers didn't work.*" Then she referred to a situation I had been asked to pray about. I was so confused by the statement, I didn't know how to respond. The reason I was confused was because I don't think of prayer as 'working' or 'not working'. I think of prayer as '*being in relationship with God*' or '*not being in relationship with God*'. My prayers don't work? What about yours? For this person, prayers go to a God who is not there. The relationship has not been established so there is no sense of awareness.

If the beginning of prayer is beginning a relationship with God, then the continuing of that relationship means developing an awareness of God in our lives. We can only see how much God gives to us, how much God provides for us, when we are aware of God's presence in our lives. What seemed like absence before, what seemed like unanswered requests to a God who just does stuff, becomes a personal awareness of all God is doing all the time in this life, in this moment. Psalm 25 says, "*Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me into your truth, and teach me...*" (4-5).

We are learning. We are really like children, which is why the Lord's Prayer begins, "*Our Father...*" Jesus referred to God as "*Abba*", or "*Daddy*". Calvin called Scripture baby talk to God. As we mature in our relationship with God, we become aware that God is not just a machine that flips a 'yes' or 'no' switch that either gives us or doesn't give us whatever it is we ask for. In the same way, a child grows into the knowledge that maintaining a relationship with a parent is not dependent upon what the parent is able to give the child. The relationship itself is what matters.

It is only in that maturing relationship that **an awareness of God's constant presence** begins to engage our minds and souls and hearts in such a way that wherever we begin to look, we begin to see hints of God's kingdom. "*Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.*" In that dawning awareness of the presence of God, we begin to see Christ working with us, through us, around us and within us. We begin to see a glimmer of the kind of world, the kind of person, God wishes for all of us. And seeing this glimmer is only possible by constant and continuing prayer. Prayer is the channel, the conduit, the foundational elements of the temple we are made to be.

We begin our personal, intimate relationship with God by the simple act of prayer. There is no performance. There are no right words, but there are words that can help us and we should use them whenever we want or need to. There will be no earthly record of the time you or I spend in prayer with God, only a heavenly remembrance of our desire to learn the ways of God. This deepening relationship with God will lead us deeper into worship, deeper into creation, deeper into Scripture, deeper into our relationships with others. Soon, our awareness of the presence of God will rise to the surface. Tragedy and suffering will have a tinge of God's presence. The emptiness of life will begin to appear as a fallow field for God to sow new ideas, new life, new dreams. The joys of life here will begin to seem to us as divine gifts and images of great promises seen through a mirror darkly.

And then, out of this awareness which we have developed in our relationship with God in prayer, we will begin to see with the eyes of God and Christ and the Holy Spirit. And by that I mean what the Psalmist means:

*“Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness’ sake”* (6-7). This is a Kingdom mindset, an attitude which seeks out the things of God and Christ. And the things of God and Christ are mercy, steadfast love and forgiveness. *“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”*

Through prayer, as we mature into a deep relationship with God and become aware of God’s presence in all ways, we will begin to be **intentional about our prayer life and therefore intentional about our mindset and attitudes** in the world. It is not enough for me to stand up here and tell you to trust God, though as your pastor I do that. Nor is it enough for any one of us to tell another to simply change your attitude and perspective on the world. When I worked in a multi-national financial corporation, I worked on a huge floor in a skyscraper. When you walked in you could see the whole floor. It took up half a city block. The reason you could see the whole floor is because the cubicles were only chest high. Two people to a cube. There were probably 1800 people on that floor, working on phones. It was loud, but not with discernable voices. It was more like a constant drone, a hive. It was soul-killing - the atmosphere, the work, the management style. And sometimes, to make it worse, the guy who wanted to be the next manager would see me sitting with my head in my hands talking on the phone, staring into the computer screen. When I was done with the call, he would lean into my cube, look at me sympathetically and say, *“Smile!”* As I got closer to my spectacular end there (which is a story for another time), I started saying *“No.”*

My whole point is you cannot simply change your attitude, your perspective and your mindset. Sometimes, the reason is exterior to you. Sometimes, the reason is you. Most of the time, the issue is you. Changing your attitude, becoming intentional about your mindset, takes time, effort, discipline and attention. And for us, as followers of Christ, that means doing what Jesus did - being intentional about our prayer life.

I would be lying to you if I stood up here and told you that, because of my prayer life, I always see the possibility of mercy, steadfast love and forgiveness in any situation. I would be making things up if I said I have a Kingdom mindset. But prayer is like a personal library with walls full of books. For those of you who love books, you will know this. The important thing about a personal library is not that you have read every book. The important thing is that if I need to know something I know which book or books to go to in order to find out. I may not always be merciful, loving and forgiving. I may not always see the possibility of those qualities in the situation or relationship I am in, but because of my prayer life, I do know now where I need to go in order to find out what I need to know. Sometimes it is the other person. Sometimes the circumstances are all beyond my capacity and ability to overcome the blocks to a Kingdom worldview. Most of the time, though, it is me. The problem is me. I get in my way and as a result, I get in God’s way.

Prayer, and a life of prayer, is where we find out how the problems, the joys, the intractable issues, the successes all point us to God and Christ. This happens because of the Holy Spirit. You may not even know what to pray about. You may not fully understand, as GK Chesterton says, that the problem with the world is finally only me. That is all OK. Because the Holy Spirit teaches us. *“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. And God who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God”* (Rom 8:26-27). But we can’t know the truth of Paul’s words unless we are doing the thing itself. The Spirit prays for us when we pray. God knows our prayers, even if we do not,

when we are praying. It is quite a humbling realization. We go into a life of prayer to be in relationship, only to find out that God has been reaching out to us in an ongoing relationship that has been happening without our even knowing it. And we find that out in prayer.

This is where we find strength, though, to face the world. Through the relationship and awareness we have developed in our prayer time, where we have begun to develop an intentional attitude about God's Kingdom of mercy, love and forgiveness, we can confidently ask God to "*lead us not into temptation and to deliver us from evil*" because we have already seen God do that for us, over and over again.

Prayer is not a duty or a rule, though it can be helpful to be dutiful about praying regularly and even to set up rules so that you will pray daily. The obligation to prayer in our faith life is always born out of the great gift we have been given through the Holy Spirit - the gift of faith, of seeing the presence of God's mercy, love and forgiveness, of the presence and possibility of Christ, even in the valley of the shadow of death. If we desire the relationship, awareness and intentionality God wants us to have, then we will pray. If we have seen God's love and mercy in our lives, then prayer becomes a responsibility born of our joy and hope in our relationship with a God who is present with us, a God who provides for us and a God who is concerned about our deepest concerns, a God who saves us.

So let us end with a very short, simple prayer from John's 3rd letter. There is no performance for others in his words. There is no performance for God. Only a recognition of the presence of God's Kingdom among those who pray for God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Let us pray: "*Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul*" (3 Jn 2). Pray, then, like this:

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...*

Amen.