

From Pastor Marissa Becklin

TEACH US HOW TO PRAY

I have been asked by so many people about how to pray correctly, or how to pray spontaneously. Many of us are comfortable saying the prayers that we learned as young ones—the Lord's Prayer, the blessing of a meal, a prayer before bed—but feel out of our depths trying to do much else (especially if we're asked to do so in front of others). Our world has done a really good job of making prayer out to be an extremely pious activity that needs to be marked by specific phrases, or structure, or needs to have a certain quality of grandeur or respectability about it.

But here's the thing—religious piety is not the goal for God in our prayer life. We don't pray so that we can show God how devout we are, or how many flowery words we know. We pray for the purpose of being in relationship with the one who made us and called us (and who keeps calling us) mine. We pray because we are human beings who know what pain is and who need to lean on the divine presence of God—who need to rely on the one who knows our hearts fully and who loves us anyway. We pray because we need to be known, and loved, and nourished. We pray because, like Jesus, we need to be nourished for the journey of ministry and care for the world that lies ahead. Prayer is not a show, or a test—it is like turning to a source of water.

Even so, it can feel overwhelming to know how to show up to God with so much weighing on our hearts. We carry so much, after all—how do we know how or where to start? I think this is why the disciples ask Jesus the question that they do in Luke's Gospel—"Lord, teach us how to pray." Because there is so much to bring before God, and they need some guidance in understanding where to start.

Jesus responds to their question with the words of the Lord's Prayer. First, Jesus gives us the words to address God. "Father, hallowed be thy name." These words help us understand the relationship that we have with God—as with a parent who loves us and is with us always. But this parent is also divine—is holy and all-knowing, meaning that God is big enough for all that we bring forward in prayer. In a world where brokenness abounds and our existence is so fragile, this name for God reminds us that when we come to God in prayer we come before one who has power over all and who is near to us at the same time. The phrase "Your kingdom come" invites us to ask God to truly take charge of our life, to bring justice and peace to our world.

The next petitions deal with our needs: First, our daily bread. This reminds us of the story of manna in the desert when Israel was set free from Egypt: each day they had the bread that they needed, and no more than that. When we pray this way, we ask God for what we need for each day, understanding that we can only handle what faces us on this day and trusting that we will also receive tomorrow what we need at the appropriate time. When we ask for our daily bread, we ask for help in trusting the promise that God is with us today and that God will be with us when tomorrow arrives, too.

Second, our need for forgiveness. This reminds us that when we come before God we come forward as people who are deeply and carefully and lovingly known. God knows all of our hearts, knows the parts of ourselves that we would rather hide from others, and extends grace and love to us in the midst of that. When we pray we approach that grace and step right into it, letting it wash over us like water. We need regular reminding that God comes to us in this caring way, setting us free from shame and despair.

And with that comes our third need: the promise of fidelity from God. God **will** deliver us from evil, both in the midst of our lives and on the last day. When we pray we are reminded that God keeps God's promises, and is steadfast.

These petitions name what is essential for the life of our individual bodies, the life of our communal body—be it society, the church, or the world—and the life of our ongoing relationship with God. These are the gifts of the kingdom, which will not be refused, because they flow from our being united with the very being of God, who sustains, forgives, and is faithful to us.

This is how Jesus teaches us to pray—with a name for our Divine parent, with knowledge of and hope in God's grace, mercy, steadfastness, and love, and with enough boldness to be honest about ourselves, our lives, our fears, our pain. Jesus tells the disciples to really **ask** God for what we need, to trust in our relationship with God enough to let prayer be honest. When we fall before God, God will give us what we need. But sometimes daily bread doesn't taste like we thought it would (or wanted it to). Jesus reminds us that what God gives us in response will be what God knows we need—not necessarily what we wanted. This can be frustrating, but is ultimately good news—God will give us exactly what we need, whether it's what we asked for or not. Thank goodness.

In our daily life, let us carry this story of prayer with us. We are welcomed by God to show up in relationship with the one who loves us, whether we feel like we have the right words or not. God's grace and mercy are waiting for us, and they don't depend on us.

Amen—let it be so.

Pastor Marissa