

July 28, 2019

Teach Us to Pray--Persistence, Ask, Seek, Knock, Good Gifts

Throughout the gospels, we often hear that especially after addressing a large group, Jesus will go off by himself and pray. It was a part of his living of his life, part of his ministry on Earth. This time as he comes back from his prayer time, one of his disciples asks, "Lord teach us to pray like John taught his disciples." Obviously, this disciple had been around John enough that he knew that he had taught his disciples, had taken them apart and helped them along with their prayer life. And now he wants Jesus to do the same for them. And the response is one that we're all familiar with. His first response is what we have come to know as the Lord's prayer. When you pray, say this, I won't go through that. I'm pretty sure most of you know it. If you need some help, we'll be saying it later in the service. Because we say it in almost every service in the Episcopal church, whether it be morning prayer, noonday prayer, evening prayer, the Eucharist, compline. The Lord's Prayer is one that we do regularly and often.

But that's not the only thing that Jesus said about prayer. Now, it was certainly very important. It's one that we hold on to, but according to Luke, he had some other things that he said about prayer that I believe are significant. He tells the story of the friend going to a friend's house, asking for three loaves of bread at midnight. I must tell you, if you come to my door at midnight, you better knock loud cause I'm falling fast asleep. I'm not just in bed. I'm out. But he says, friend says, "No, I'm already in bed. The kids are in bed. Go somewhere else." And Jesus says, "Even though the friend that causes your friend won't get up and give you the bread, your persistence will drag him right out of bed and he'll give you what you need just to get rid of it."

Thought that was an interesting story to tell about prayers and God, but that's Jesus and that's what he gave us. Persistence in prayer, something that we especially I think as Episcopalians need to hear and remember. That prayer is supposed to be a part of our life, not just as a last resort when everything else has gone wrong and we finally realize that maybe I better ask God to get involved with this. Prayer is something that should be a part of our lives and be persistent in our lives, coming before God regularly. But in the right way with some knowledge of what we're praying for and why we're praying for it.

You see a lot of times a prayer because for a lot of people, a kind of magical manipulation. If I only pray the right way, pray the right words. If I truly pray the name of Jesus to win this lottery, then that should take place, right? Didn't Jesus say someplace else, that if you ask anything in my name, I will give it to you. I won't ask for a show of hands who I suspect that a few of you have said, "Lord Jesus, could I please win the lottery?"

You should also listen for that voice that says, "If you buy a ticket, that would be helpful." We must know what we're praying for and why we're praying for it, and sometimes we have the very best intentions. People have asked us to pray for them because they're sick. People have asked us to pray for them because their life is a very

difficult, there's trauma. There's something in their life. Sometimes we take it upon ourselves to pray for others because we think their life is going in the wrong direction and we must really evaluate what is it that we're trying to do? Are we trying to change the situation? Are we asking God to change it so that we'll be happier? Are we asking God to perform a miracle? Which doesn't happen all that often. It's something out of the norm and yet miracles are prayed for every day and yet they're not fulfilled, and people often walk away wondering why that is. Understanding what we're praying for and what the results might be. I think it's very important.

Too many times our prayers are focused on the other so that they can change to suit us. I believe that our prayers more often need to be focused on us. And I've heard a lot of people say, "I find it uncomfortable to pray for myself. I don't mind praying for other people, but it just doesn't feel right to pray for myself." And I would like to say to you, pray for yourself every single day, but pray for the right things. What is that Jesus goes on to say about prayer? Ask and it will be given. Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be open to you.

It's about us becoming what God wants us to be and what we have said and promised God that we are going to be. We are going to seek the Holy Spirit, see it in our lives, be open to it, be aware of it. Understand that the holy spirit isn't for us to manipulate the world around us. It's for us to be changed so that we see and know and understand the world as God sees it. So that we become people that can address the world as citizens of God's kingdom and the change occurs in us not in them.

But when that change occurs in us, then we who are uncomfortable in so many situations, when someone says, "I'd like to talk to you about a problem that I'm having." And immediately we feel like I'm not the person to talk to. I don't know the right words to answer. But what if we took the time to pray, to God and the Holy Spirit, to help me to hear what this friend is saying to me, to understand what the issue and the problem is, to give me the words to speak and to address this in a godly way. Isn't that a prayer worth saying? Isn't that something that could lead us and guide us into being more comfortable in a very uncomfortable situation?

You see, I know it's uncomfortable because I've been in those situations a lot. When you wear a collar and you have an office at a church, people think that they can come to you and tell you their problems. And that's fine, but they also expect you to be able to help fix the problem. And I'm not qualified to do that on my own. Matter of fact, I've never known any priest, male or female who is qualified to do that on their own. It's only as we offer ourselves up in prayer. It's only when we ask the Holy Spirit to be a part of this whole situation, to give us ears to hear a mind to understand. And then words to speak to the issue that are not mine but God's.

Now, I'm not saying that every time a problem or an issue has come, and that prayer has been said, that the person goes away with everything resolved. Matter of fact, I'm not sure that it's ever happened. But we had come together in the presence of God and we have tried to deal with the issues, not just with our own expertise, but with the

presence of the Holy Spirit because that's what prayer brings into it. Seek, and you will find. Ask, it will be given. Knock, and the door will be open. That's our prayers. We're knocking. We're trying to come closer. We're trying to become what God wants us to be so that we can then address the world in the way God wants us to address the world.

That's the power of prayer. Not that we can manipulate what's going on in their life because I don't like the way they're living it or because I believe they're heading down the wrong path. It's about being present with the Holy Spirit and hoping to be helpful as the person themselves are looking for the way. It's about holding up our brothers and sisters in prayer, they might find what God is seeking to give them.

What's the last thing that Jesus says in this short passage about prayer? He talks about parents giving gifts to their children. If your child asks for a fish, would you give them a snake? If they asked for an egg, would you give him a scorpion? And I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that all of you would say we would never do that. And he says, "If you who are evil," now remember he's talking to his disciples, right? These guys have been traveling with him, we think they're pretty good at this point in their lives. "If you who are evil can give your children good gifts, how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to you who ask?" Isn't that comforting? Then if I ask for the Holy Spirit, Abba, Father is going to give it to me. I may not always understand it completely. I may not always feel it the way I might, but I believe that God gives the Holy Spirit because that's God's promise.

God saying, "I will be with you in these most difficult of times so that you know when to speak and you know when just to listen and be silent." That you have the strength and courage to be present in the most difficult times of people's lives and not be afraid. And lend, what support you can and quite possibly speak the words that God has for them so they can take another step, so they can get up the next morning, so they can be encouraged to move forward as a child of God. That's what prayer is about. The Lord's prayer is a powerful prayer, and we say it regularly. We are called to be persistent in prayer. Make it a part of our lives every day so that we can recognize the blessings that God has brought into our lives, so that we can recognize the opportunities that God brings into our lives. So, in seeking, knocking, asking, the Holy Spirit will be with us to give us strength and courage to face the day, to face the issues, to be with those in need, and to show them the love of God.

Gregory Hein – Rector