

“Teach Us to Pray” / Luke 11:1-13 / 28 July 2013

The disciple says to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” ~There was a little town down in Bible-Belt Oklahoma; this place had one distillery and two churches. Now the two churches were Southern Baptist and Methodist, so they didn’t see eye to eye on a whole lot of things—beginning with baptism. But they did agree on one thing: neither church wanted a distillery in their community. It gave them a bad image. It didn’t reflect the community’s values, like abstinence from alcohol (or at least secrecy about it). To make matters worse, the owner of the distillery was a vocal atheist. Well, from his pulpit one Sunday, the Baptist preacher railed against the distillery, “That brew house of devilry must go! Do we want our beloved town to benefit from the debauchery of the wino? Shall we have a hand in the misery of the alcoholic’s wife and children?” Not to be outdone, the Methodist preacher, from his pulpit, cried out, “Some towns are known for their wheat; they provide bread for the world. Other towns are known for their corn; they feed the world’s livestock. Are we to be known as the town that makes the world drunk on hard liquor?” Again the Baptist minister asked his congregation, “What if a man drinks our hometown liquor then drives his car into a school bus full of children, sweet little kindergarteners...with...learning disabilities...and...hand-me-down clothes? Isn’t their blood on our heads? Since the distillery makes that selfsame liquor here, with our water—the very water in which we bathe and baptize—are we not accomplices in that drunk driver’s crime?”

The two churches eventually decided to unite against a common enemy: the distillery. They met together on a Saturday night to pray earnestly that God would do something. Make it go out of business, they prayed. Or make it close down, or at least move away to another town. “O God, let that distillery move up north to a blue sate, where most of the alcoholics live anyway.” They prayed and prayed. And as they were gathered together praying for an end to the distillery, a menacing thunderstorm arose. Dark clouds gathered fast. The wind whipped and raged. And a bolt of lightning struck the old distillery! And it burned to the ground. The churchfolk were jubilant. Of course, the next day, both the Baptists and the Methodists heard long, gleeful sermons about the “power of prayer.” And on Monday morning, the insurance company informed the distillery’s owner that they wouldn’t pay a penny for the damages. The fire had been “an act of God,” they said, and acts of God were not covered in the policy. The atheist distillery owner was furious. He got a lawyer and sued the two churches for conspiring with God to destroy his business. Of course, both churches denied that they had anything to do with the cause of the fire. The presiding judge opened the trial with these words: “I find one thing in this case most perplexing. We have a situation here where the plaintiff, an atheist, is professing his belief in the power of prayer. And the defendants, all faithful church members, are denying the very same power.”

Prayer! Some people talk as if it's magic. And many of us have learned that it is not! Prayer. Whether it's Jews writing their prayers on little scraps of paper and squeezing them into the cracks in the Wailing Wall; whether it's Muslims waking at 5am to the haunting cries of a muezzin; whether it's serene Buddhists sitting in the lotus position or Hindus dancing all in a trance; whether it's Presbyterians saying “debts and debtors” or Methodists saying “trespasses and those who trespass against us”; you can't have a religion without prayer. Prayer is the most basic element in the life of faith, more important than creeds or dogmas. Quite often, prayer is more important than belief itself, because it's more possible. Prayer does the one thing that all religions aspire to do: it gets us in touch with the Sacred, the Holy. And yet, quite frankly, we often find prayer boring and ineffective. We find it intimidating, because what if we don't get what we ask for? We find it hard to stay focused, because we can't be sure if it's even working. All of us have made perfectly reasonable requests to God in prayer, and the heavens remained silent, and our fair and reasonable request went unmet. Prayer! We've all had disappointing or mind-numbingly dull experiences of prayer. But much of what we assume about prayer is false. Prayer is really nothing more than directing our thoughts, our hopes, and our reflections toward God.

Yes, we cherish misconceptions about prayer. I read a sad little news article online some years

ago. The headline said, “Letters to God end up in ocean, unread.” A New Jersey fisherman found a plastic bag full of letters bobbing around in the ocean—300 letters in all, some of them dating back to 1973. The letters were addressed to God, in care of the Rev. Grady Cooper, an associate pastor at a Baptist church in Jersey City. Apparently, Pastor Cooper had been encouraging people to send him their prayer requests, saying that he would lay them on the church’s communion table and pray for each of them. The pastor died in 2004, and nobody knows why the letters ended up in the ocean. And why were they never opened? Some were neatly written on stationary; others were scrawled out feverishly. Some were slightly comical: “God, I’m still praying to hit the lottery twice: first the 50 thousand, then after some changes have taken place, the millionaire.” Another letter asks God to “calm that woman who called Internal Revenue on me.” One letter clues God in on the times and places where a neighbor commits his infidelities. But other letters were less amusing. There were anguished spouses and children pouring their hearts out to God on paper, begging for help with loved ones who struggle with addictions and poverty and poor choices.

One unwed mother wrote that her baby was due in four weeks, and would God please make the father fall in love and marry her. All these heartrending cries for help, probably cleaned out of the dead pastor’s office and thrown into the ocean, unread. Well, the man who found them fixed that! He sold the whole collection of letters on eBay. I tell this sad tale to illustrate a popular idea about prayer: it’s about asking for things. And yet, heartfelt prayer does so much more than just ask. It admires. It ponders. It says thanks. It confesses. It complains. It sits in silence. Prayer is really nothing more than directing our thoughts, our hopes, and our reflections toward God. It’s about talking to God, simply talking, as to a parent or a friend.

The disciple says to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” And in response, we get Luke’s economical version of the Lord’s Prayer—which is slightly different from Matthew’s version, which we say in church every week.

Prayer is all about engaging with God. In the Old Testament, think how God bickers with Abraham over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Think how Gideon disagrees with God and lives to tell the tale. Think how Jacob even comes to blows with the Almighty...and prevails. Think how Moses argues with God. In some of the funnier chapters of Exodus, God and Moses pick at each other like an old married couple. In those stories, Moses really does change God’s mind. But you see, this is what prayer can be, a lively engagement with God. And even some religions without deities encourage people to pray in the same way—not to “God,” but simply to the Universe. It’s a healing thing for us to direct our thoughts, our hopes, our fears, and our dreams outside of ourselves, to broadcast them in prayer. And at least the Old Testament God—like my wife—would far prefer a good quarrel to a short, polite conversation. God would rather hear all your truest, ugliest words than all your prettiest, least sincere, most reverent ones. Prayer is about real engagement. Prayer can be blessing or begging. Prayer can be banter or blaming. Prayer can be calm and lovely, or it can be rash and harsh. But it’s got to be real. It’s got to come from the heart. And it has to be ongoing. This is real prayer: a running conversation, the deep, full unburdening of our hearts and minds in honest exchange. Prayer is simply directing our thoughts, our hopes, and our longings toward God, then listening...because very often prayer can lead us to new conclusions, just like a conversation with a trusted friend can do. The dialogue of prayer feels like a monologue much of the time, and yet how often it changes our minds, our hearts, our attitudes! How often it gives us courage that we didn’t have before!

“Lord, teach us to pray,” the disciple asks. Think of the well-known image called “Praying Hands” by the medieval artist Albrecht Durer. This picture is probably the best known symbol of prayer in the Western world. But do you know whose hands they are? They’re not Jesus’ hands. They’re the hands of Albert Durer. The well-known artist Albrecht Durer had an equally talented brother named Albert. (Albrecht and Albert...I never know what some parents are thinking.) As young men in a poor family from Nuremburg, both brothers aspired to be artists. But since they couldn’t both afford art school, they made a pact. They would toss a coin, and whoever lost the toss would work in

the coal mines to put the other through art school. And after four years, the one who had the good fortune to become an artist would then put the coal miner through school. Albrecht won the coin toss, and Albert went into the coal mines. After four years, when Albrecht finished art school and became a respected artist, he offered to work while Albert went into artist's training. But Albert refused. Four years in the coal mines of medieval Germany had left Albert's hands too damaged for art. He could barely hold a glass, never mind a paint brush. Remember the picture of Albert's hands? They're strong and misshapen, with swollen joints and arthritic knuckles. Tragically, in earning daily bread for his brother and for himself, Albert had forever lost the possibility of making his own art. He would never make a name for himself. And yet, his grateful brother, the famed Albrecht Durer, wanted to honor Albert's sacrifice by immortalizing those broken hands—every callous and joint—in his well-known drawing.

So, how do we pray? Well, just like Albert Durer, you too have hands. And just like poor Albert, the choices you've made in your life can be seen—in part—by looking at those hands. (You can tell at a glance at my hands that I've never worked in the coal mines.) Your hands tell your story. Look at them! Your hands bear witness to your life in their texture and their thickness, in their softness or hardness. With hands, what you see is what you get, in all their plainness, or brokenness, their real life history. You, too, have hands like Albert, and yours, too, tell a unique story. Now open those hands of yours in prayer. Your very own hands with all their strength or weakness, with all their swollen joints, or painted fingernails, or hairy knuckles, or protruding veins. With all their rings—representing sacred commitments—or their scars, open your hands to God in intimate conversation. Take the person that you really are, a person with disappointed hopes, and wasted talents, like Albert, a person with all your many joys, and sorrows, and secrets, and needs, and sins; don't try to hide any of it. Now engage God in real and honest talk. Talk about everything that's on your heart and mind. That's prayer. It's sloppy, personal, and intimate. It's not all reverence and fancy words. It's certainly not a terse little wish list. Prayer is real and gritty, constant and passionate. Think of Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, with his endless conversation with God. He's walking down the road, muttering his prayers, and he says, "Am I bothering you with all this talk?" The donkey who pulls his cart loses a shoe, and Tevye says, "It's bad enough you pick on poor old Tevye the milkman, but what do you have against my donkey?" All the thoughts and emotions of being human are appropriate for prayer. Beg. Banter. Blame. Bless. With words or without, prayer is really nothing more than directing our thoughts, our hopes, and our reflections toward God. Amen.