

Proper 12 Year C 2025

I'm not very good at praying. I'm talking about prayer on my own. I was taught as a very young child the bedtime prayer.... "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." That prayer is really kind of terrifying when you think about it. Dying in the middle of the night... and my soul being taken... where? I thought. But I dutifully said it every night. Later, I learned the Lord's Prayer. I would lay in my bed and recite it to myself, and then I would add blessings: God bless Mama, Bobo, Taylor, Bob, Ma and Pa, Grandma and Granddaddy. My dad was in the insurance business, and he had a pronounced fear of fire; that got passed on to me... so I would pray that the house didn't catch on fire; I prayed that I would never get kidnapped. I prayed that my anxiety would leave me alone. Years later when my Dad got sick, I prayed that he would be healed from cancer. He died at age fifty three. For a while, I prayed for the forgiveness of my sins, but that became rather perfunctory.... And besides, my sins were too many to name. There came a time somewhere along the way that I quit saying my bedtime prayers. They seemed to me a conversation with myself.

My mother, who could pray up a storm at the drop of a hat.... She and I got into a conversation about prayer, and I told her that it seemed pointless to me.... I thought she might be disappointed at my agnosticism, but she said, "Our very lives are prayers... in our waking and our sleeping..." that our heartbeats were the purest form... and then she mused that prayers are meant to be said together, in community, because that practice

“gets our individual egos out of the way,”And what’s left is the human energy of devotion... and surely, she said, “God can’t resist that.” I miss such conversations with her. I wonder if in her mute and fading consciousness, she still prays.

“Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples,” one of the disciples asks Jesus in our reading today from Luke. The disciples, being good Jews, regulars at the Synagogue, certainly knew how to pray... so the question more likely meant.... What should we pray for? I’m certain, that like you and me, the disciples were a little tired of thoughts and prayers. Like you and me, they had experienced prayers not being answered... a loved one who died despite prayers on their behalf. In the Synagogue they would have prayed for the prospering of Israel, its well-being and dignity, only to see their homeland occupied by a foreign power... their people crushed and abused into the despair of poverty and oppression. I would rephrase the question: Jesus, given that some prayers seem to get answered and some don’t, should we pray at all? ...Does prayer really serve any purpose? Is life merely a random unfolding of events and decisions? ...and, if we pray, for what shall we ask with any integrity?

Jesus’s response of course is the words of what’s known as the Lord’s Prayer, followed by a parable. The same exchange in more detail, but without the parable, takes place in Matthew’s Gospel. Prayer is a prominent theme in Luke. Jesus never does anything in this Gospel unless he prays first... so prayer is most important to this writer. So, again, what shall we pray for? What do we make of Jesus’s answer to this age-old

question? First, I think, prayer is not so much about me... as it is about us. Prayer, chiefly, is about our common life. The first petition in the so-called Lord's Prayer is to pray for God's kingdom manifest in earth. Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. The verb "come" is in the aorist tense in the Greek. That means it refers both to the future and to the present. It is a reference to the imminence of God's dream for the world happening as we speak. It is not expressing hope for a utopian future, nor for a blissful life after death; it is a blessing upon the kingdom of God emerging in our own time. To reinforce that point we then ask for enough sustenance for today: "give us today our daily bread." The inference is that today is all there is; it is for today that heaven is built in earth... and in that day we are to forgive each other as we are forgiven. That is a posture for living in God's kingdom of equals. And finally, save us from whatever calamity awaits. We say that with all confidence knowing that God's love and goodness will always find us, that no matter how dark the night, the morning will follow. The prayer is a mantra of how we are to live. It speaks of a pattern, an orientation that informs our everyday lives. That is what prayer is supposed to do. Prayer, at its heart, is formative.

We, good people, rightly live within a predisposition of sacrifice. That is the sum of Jesus's teaching. Thus, we pray for the good that is greater than ourselves. That is true sacrifice. In the prologue of this Gospel Luke describes what this "good" looks like: God has deposed the arrogant; God has dethroned the powers of this world; God has

taken the wealth of the rich and raised up the poor and the hungry, and blessed them with abundance. We pray for the coming of God's kingdom, which is to say that we are in solidarity with the marginalized of our world, so that the world may be made whole. The coming of God's kingdom, salvation, in short, looks like the healing of our social, economic and political systems, so that all can participate in the abundance of this world. Prayer is not a litany of our solitary wants and needs, spoken in whispers, but prayer is intentional mindfulness that is prelude to enlightened action.... Enlightened action for the good of the whole. Not just action, but also energy. Prayer is Imaginative energy.

You've heard me say it before, and I haven't yet found a better definition: Prayer is the art of paying attention... emphasis on art. Emphasis on art because art requires the active imagination. And there is nothing more powerful, more creative, more redemptive than the imagination. The great Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge believed that the human imagination was one and the same as the Holy Spirit. It comes like wind; it comes as fire; and it comes with great power. Indeed, the human imagination, the Holy Spirit, has shaped our world, both for good and ill. But prayer among the faithful orients the imagination toward the good... and good people, the imagination can move mountains. The imagination makes what seems impossible possible. When engaged with the imagination we are engaged with the mind of God, which creates and loves the world amid infinite possibility. To say that prayer doesn't

change things is absurd. We are witnesses over human history to what the imagination can do. The Civil Rights Movement that challenged the injustice of a racist system was grounded in prayer, and lo and behold the system changed. Prayer will change system after system, again and again. Lives are prayer, and lives change lives.

Perhaps our post-modern problem with prayer, or our expectations of it, is that we haven't taken it seriously enough. Perhaps our expectations have been too low. Instead of asking for a good parking space, might we ask for justice in the world. Instead of asking for success, might we ask for the world transformed. I've heard it said that prayer, at its heart, is the practice of aligning our will with the will of God. I would say that prayer is aligning our imaginative potential with the infinite possibilities of God's imagination. As our lives are contingent on each other, so are our prayers.

And Jesus adds to his reply to his disciples, a parable, the gist of which is that we must persist. Prayer is not a one-time ask... but a practice, a pattern, a way of life; a way of life that is in the service of the greater good. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote: "Nearby is the country they call life... you will know it by its seriousness. Give me your hand." To pray, brothers and sisters is to take the hand of God, and enter with all seriousness into the imaginative adventure called life, fully aware, fully present.... To take God's hand is to become prayer for the world. Prayer that is body and blood. Prayer that is prelude to imaginative action.... And action is salvation in its becoming...

and thus, the kingdom of God, earth as it is in heaven... not for the future, but for now.

So let us continue to pray... and pray without ceasing.