

Our Unity: The Lord's Prayer

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Romans 8:18-21, 26-27

Luke 11:1-4

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

*The Spirit helps us in our weakness,
for we do not know how to pray as
we ought. – Romans 8:26*



Art by Carrie Grant

A reading from Luke's gospel, chapter 11:

[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say:

*Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial."*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Pray with me, would you?

Lord, teach us to pray, not just with our lips but with our lives. Teach us to pray, not just with our words but with our true worship. In Jesus' name. Amen.

It's finally here! Graduation season. How many of you have been to, or are going to a graduation this year? [11:00 We are celebrating high school graduation with these important members of our church family. Congratulations!] You know why they make you wear those funny hats at graduation? **It's to make your brain look bigger than it actually is.** After 12 or 16 years of carrying heavy book bags you are well prepared for a **career – in backpacking.** [But really, this is a very impressive list of colleges and universities. Whether you are staying near or going far, taking a gap year or going to work, we are so proud and glad for you.]

[11:00: We want you grads to always remember that Woods is the place where *you belong*. We are your faith family. We pray for you, and we constantly look for you -- and we will harass you to hang out with us, if necessary because we love you and we need you. So keep us close in your hearts.]

Graduation season also means that we are nearing the end of the program year at Woods. All year we have been focusing on the theme of unity. We have considered our deep bond with other Christian communities here and around the world. It's a joy to have Daniel Mayo with us today from Ministry of Hope in Malawi, one of our longest and most important mission partnerships. You'll hear from him in just a bit. We love being able share in Christian unity with you and all our friends in Malawi, Daniel.

Our bond isn't just with our grads, some who are heading to places far away, and some who are staying blessedly nearby; it's also our Christian brothers and sisters in Israel and Palestine, Africa, Guatemala and Cuba. A new kind of unity has grown strong here in our own community in recent months.

Last fall Woods helped to found a multi-faith County-wide partnership called ACT – it stands for Arundel Connecting Together. People of different faiths are coming together across racial, cultural and religious lines: Muslims, Catholics, Quakers, Unitarians, and many kinds of Protestants – all races and backgrounds. ACT is listening to the community, so that together we can speak with one voice, making connections and seeking solutions to the large problems that impact our community – issues such as mental health, affordable housing, school safety, and many more. We are tired of the politics of division. Are you? There are listening sessions next Sunday and a gathering of the ACT congregations coming up on Thursday, June 13. I hope you'll take part in both events.

Can you imagine the worship? It was amazing at the last ACT event. A multi-congregational choir raised the roof. Hundreds of us were standing in the back and along the sides of the sanctuary of First Christian Community Church of Annapolis. Undergirding all of this is prayer. Prayer is our unity.

Every summer, since I don't know when, I've preached a Summer Sermon Series. This summer, as we conclude our year-long emphasis on unity, the other pastors and I will be preaching on prayer, specifically the one prayer that unites Christians around the world, the Lord's Prayer. In slightly differing forms, all Christians speak these sacred words. Catholic Christians call it the "Our Father." Orthodox and Protestants say "The Lord's Prayer."

This summer we're going to look at our prayer of unity in detail. Just about every Christian knows the Lord's Prayer by heart. Some say it every day. But have you ever stopped to think about the meaning behind the words we say? What does this prayer tell us about who Jesus is? What does it tell us about who Jesus wants us to be?

That's what we're going to be considering over the next few months. We are going to have to look closely. Compared to other topics, Jesus said very little about prayer. He talked a lot about compassion, generosity, racial and economic justice, and what this world would look like if

people truly put God first. He called that the Kingdom of God. Money and business were more often on his lips, more often than heaven and hell, and prayer combined – but here’s the thing, Jesus modeled prayer constantly.

He prayed publicly and privately. He prayed at his baptism,ⁱ before he chose his disciples,ⁱⁱ and when he performed miracles.ⁱⁱⁱ He prayed with his closest friends and with complete strangers. He prayed at meals, and in the synagogue, and on the street. Jesus’ dying words were a prayer.^{iv} Luke says he often went off to a quiet place to pray.^v His disciples saw the depth of his prayer life and what it meant to him, so they said to him: “Lord, teach us to pray.”

In the rest of my time today (which is short), I want to say three things about prayer in general as we begin our study of the Lord’s Prayer.

Prayer is something we have to learn. The need to pray is born in us, but we have to be taught to pray. A baby’s cry and an eagle’s flight are both anthems to God’s glory – they are creatures doing the things the Creator intended them to do. But sustaining prayer, the kind of prayer that transforms lives and society, is a habit we have to establish and continually learn.

Most of us learn to pray as small children. We learn prayer formulas: “Now I lay me down to sleep...” and “God is great; God is good...” formulas that help us understand the soul and structure of prayer. But we should never stop there. Children are better than anybody at praying spontaneously, like the little girl who prayed, “Dear God, thank you for the baby brother, but what I asked for was a puppy.” That’s honest!

As we grow we learn...if we are lucky enough to have the right instruction...we learn to pour our hearts out before God in prayer. Remember how Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane just before he was arrested? On his knees he prayed, “*Father, take this cup from me.*” You remember how he ended that prayer, “*not my will, but yet, thy will be done.*”^{vi} He was honest and authentic in the way he prayed.

Our prayers don’t have to be heavy to be real. The wonderful Quaker author, Richard Foster tells about one of his spiritual mentors, a man named William Luther Vaswig (Great name ☺). He described Bill as, “Someone thirsting for the things of God. So I sought him out.” Foster wrote, “I said, ‘Hey Bill, you know more about prayer than I do. Will you teach me?’ So he taught me to pray by praying ... [it was] very honest, lively, heartfelt, soul searching, hilarious praying.”^{vii}

We learn to pray by praying, and the best teachers are other believers, which is why it is so important for children to worship in the sanctuary. We are going to be having four Family Worship Sundays this summer. Parents, you should feel free to have your children with you in the sanctuary any Sunday you like. We are the whole people of God, and that includes the small people.

Years ago when I was the chair of the Preparation for Ministry Committee in the Charlotte Presbytery, I met young people studying to be Presbyterian ministers who had never been to worship! Really. Most of them grew up in the church, but after the Children’s Moment they’d

been shuffled off to Sunday school -- -- for the convenience of their parents and people sitting around them. That's a problem, not just for the ministers in training, but for all those young adults who never learned how to pray regularly with others, and from the heart.

In order to be meaningful, our prayers need to be regular and authentic. Reading off a shopping list of wants – as if God were some kind of cosmic Santa Claus – that isn't authentic prayer. Jesus said, *“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you.”*^{viii} We hear that and we start in on the list, but we sometimes skip over the important part, where Jesus says, *“Remain in me, and in my word.”* Long before it is asking for something, prayer is a longing for God. It's a constant admission that we're not out here all alone. Gandhi said, “It is better to have a prayer without words than words without a heart.”

Lewis Smedes, an amazing Christian writer, ethicist, and theologian, tells about his mother and how she prayed. She was not an educated woman. She had quit school in the fourth grade. Lewis Smedes said that as a small child, “My room was next to the kitchen. At the end of the day I could hear the noise of my mother winding down her day as she put away all the pots and pans and got out all the things required for the next day. But before she went to bed, my mother would say her prayers.

Listen to how Lewis Smedes described those prayers:

“She would get on her knees in front of a rickety kitchen chair. She would grab hold of the edges of that chair as if she were holding on for dear life...and she would pour it all out to God in her native Frisian ... [she] believed her life and ours were nestled in the unseen arms of the Lord, that every good thing in life came from him, that everything we took from him needed his blessing if it was going to do us any good ... [and that] God had a special spot in his heart for a poor, bone tired widow with five little children.”^{ix}

Fifty years later he said, “I don't think she could have made it in those years without those nightly prayers.”^x

Prayer isn't easy. Anyone who thinks it is may not be going deep enough. C.S. Lewis, one the greatest Christian minds of our time, said that he never wrote a book on prayer because if he did, someone might think he knew how to pray. Prayer is that hard, but wondrous too.

For most of my life I have struggled to find the right words for prayer. Nothing seemed adequate. No offering fine enough to take to God, until I realize that prayer isn't so much about what I say, as it is about opening my heart to God. For most of my life I've done so much talking in my prayers that God couldn't get a word in edgewise! But now, by praying with others, and by studying the way Jesus prayed, I've learned that authentic prayer isn't about what I say...instead, it's about how well I listen – how well I open my heart and mind to the voice of God's Spirit.

As Don Henley says, “Learn to be still.”

[11:00 As you grads go from here, know that you are going to be in our hearts and in our prayers. Whether you are in New Hampshire or Arnold, you will never be far from us, remember that you are marked as Christ's own forever. Take time to worship and pray, take time to seek out the heart of God. Listen. And the peace of Christ be with you.]

ⁱ Luke 3:21-22

ⁱⁱ Luke 6:12-13

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 5:16, John 6:11, Matthew 14:23 and numerous other instances

^{iv} Luke 23:34, Matthew 27:46, Luke 23:46

^v Luke 5:16

^{vi} Luke 22:42

^{vii} Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, HarperOne, 2018, xv

^{viii} John 15:7

^{ix} Lewis B. Smedes, *Learning to Live the Love We Promise: For People who Believe in Commitment*, Waterbrook Press, 2001, 142

^x *ibid*