

“It doesn’t have to be the blue iris”

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Psalms 85: 7-13; Luke 11: 1-13

(The title of this sermon is from a poem by Mary Oliver, “Praying”).

Do you pray? Every day? Perhaps you tend to pray on days when there is a particular need or great joy. Are you sometimes uncomfortable with prayer? Who taught you to pray? How do you pray?

This morning’s gospel reading invites us to reflect upon our prayer life, past, present and future. There are of course so many different ways to pray—with words and without words, meditating in silence or walking in nature, reflecting on Scripture or emptying our minds, listening to music that inspires us, art, poetry, dance—and more. Some say that our very lives are prayer; others that our work is often a form of prayer.

When Jesus’ disciples ask him: Teach us to pray, he responds with a short prayer of words that have of course become the central prayer of the Christian church. The version in the gospel of Matthew is closer to what we pray today. Long ago, the church added the final verse: *for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever*, so that the prayer ends with our praising God.

Jesus’ prayer can guide us in our own prayers, personal and communal, for he teaches us how to pray and what to pray for. His prayer illustrates what we need to build and strengthen our relationship with God and with one another. That is really what prayer is all about. As we share our thoughts and feelings with God, and as we listen for God’s response, our relationships grow deeper and stronger—with God, with ourselves; with those for whom we pray; with those who are praying for us; indeed, with all who pray to God. And that is what the kingdom—or kingdom—of God is all about, a community of people caring about and for one another.

Father, hallowed be thy (your) name. Jesus begins by identifying our relationship with God in terms of intimacy and holiness. This sounds like a paradox! But Jesus invites us to pray to God both as a caring, faithful parent and as the holiest of mysteries. We can pour out our hearts to the God who listens, even as we address God with awe and humility. It is through the gift of the Holy Spirit that we too can share in divine love and holiness.

Thy kingdom come. Treating one another with compassion and honoring the holiness of every God-given life, these are essential for the building of God’s kingdom here on earth. We pray for the kingdom of God, already here through Christ and yet to be fully realized. As people of faith, we seek to work together in service and in partnership, while recognizing when we must let go and let God. The additional words from Matthew’s gospel help us to remember: *Thy will be done.*

Just by themselves, the opening words of this prayer have the power to shape us as we pray them. As we speak, feel and experience them, our understanding of what we are praying deepens, in relation to our lives and every life. We also start Jesus’ prayer with a word from the gospel of Matthew, “*Our Father,*” affirming God’s love for all creation and our inescapable interconnectedness.

And so we pray: *Our Father/Mother/Creator, the One who gave us birth, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.*

Prayer can be creative, stirring something new within us, revealing to us a possible change or next step. Prayer keeps shaping us, so that we live more and more the life to which God calls us, and for which God created us.

As we continue the prayer in Luke, we are asking God to fulfill three essential needs through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Give us each day our daily bread. We ask for every-day nourishment, for all that we need in order to live life to the fullest. Let us not miss the holy presence of God in the day-to-day things of life, for example, in the breaking of bread.

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. This word “forgive” is translated in other contexts as “release,” as in release from captivity. We are praying for release from the sins that bind us, whatever is keeping us from living connected, meaningful lives, release for both the one forgiving and the one forgiven.

It is through God’s Spirit of forgiveness that we recognize our need and our call to forgive others. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus seems to assume that we are continually forgiving everyone, as if it is already a reality, like the realm of God, both here and still to come.

When you forgive someone who has offended you or done you wrong, (and that includes forgiving yourself), you feel lighter, you are freed to experience God’s love more fully, which leads you to love still more—a never-ending, hopefully ever-expanding cycle that strengthens holy community in our midst.

And do not bring us to the time of trial. We ask that God sustain us, protect us and even deliver us from circumstances that test or threaten our faith, from trials that can cause despair. We are asking for the power of the Spirit that was with Jesus when he was suffering or tempted by evil.

Whenever or however we pray, we are basically asking for God’s presence, the gift of the Holy Spirit, which makes possible the coming of God’s reign. The Holy Spirit flowing through us and between us is a sign of God’s promise to bring the kingdom to fulfillment. I hear Jesus saying: *Persist in asking God for daily nourishment, for forgiveness, and for protection; God is committed to answering this prayer and will do so through you, my disciples, who have opened your hearts to the Spirit.*

Whenever we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we too are committing ourselves to the fulfillment of God’s kingdom through the strengthening of every relationship with love, forgiveness and faithfulness. We affirm the time when, in the beautiful words of the psalmist: *Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, righteousness and peace will kiss each other.*

I think that we are often praying when we don't realize it, and that's good, but we also need to be intentional about acknowledging or asking for God's presence with us. I invite you today to consider beginning or strengthening a practice of intentional daily prayer. I encourage you to try different ways of praying. For this coming week and even for several weeks, how about praying one verse of the Lord's Prayer each day or for a few days in a row, repeating the words slowly several times, and then sitting in silence. Let the words sink into you; reflect, read, sing, paint, move—whatever makes it possible for this prayer to live in you and through you.

This morning, when we see these beautiful altar flowers, we can give silent thanks to God. Then we might pray: *Our Father, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come--* a kingdom of beauty and new growth. And we might think of a way to bring beauty into the life of another person that day. When we see on the news a land devastated by war, we might pray for God's help and then: *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.* And we might choose to demonstrate compassion that day for someone whom we don't like.

How God works in the world will always be a mystery, and that can be very disconcerting if we understand prayer principally in terms of outcomes. There are times when we recognize the signs of God working among us and times when we don't. But in some wondrous way, the Spirit works through prayer to transform us, so that we might truly live as kin.

Once again, Mary Oliver seems to say it all, in a poem entitled "Praying."

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

Amen.

SOURCES

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