

He 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." <sup>2</sup>He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

<sup>3</sup> Give us each day our daily bread.

<sup>4</sup> And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial."

<sup>5</sup>And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; <sup>6</sup>for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' <sup>7</sup>And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' <sup>8</sup>I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

<sup>9</sup>"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.<sup>10</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>11</sup>Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? <sup>12</sup>Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? <sup>13</sup>If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

The word of God for the People of God.

**Thanks be to God.**

Ruth Burrows said that "Faith is never a mere intellectual assent but always involved commitment. It is always in action, more a verb than a noun." During this season of Lent, we are asking what are the actions, the practices of faith? How do we exercise our commitment to follow Christ, so that it will grow stronger, so that we might really know the God who is up to something here in the world, and in this neighborhood, in my life and your life.

If we had taken these practices in order beginning with the most obvious, then we would have talked about prayer several weeks ago. For many, this is the first practice that we think of. Prayer has become a force in and of itself--people claim to "believe in the power of prayer." But we never quite say exactly what power we believe prayer has. In fact, I would remind us that prayer itself does not have

power; rather God has power. So what does that say about our prayers? Why bother to pray anyway, much less to make prayer a daily practice of your faith?

Awhile back, I noticed that a friend of mine had posted a quote on Facebook by Pope Francis. Now, I don't remember what the quote said, but at the time I was so impressed by the elegance and wisdom of his words, so I made a comment about it. I said, "Where does he come up with this stuff?" And my friend readily replied, "Well, he spends 2 to 3 hours each day in prayer."

2 to 3 hours! Every day!

Does that sound daunting to anyone else?

My prayers are a lot more like the prayers of the priest in the British comedy show called "Rev." The show follows the ups and downs of life and ministry for an Anglican Vicar in London, and interspersed in the episodes, we find the vicar at prayer--we hear his own voice in his head, talking with great ease to God--he may be sitting in the church sanctuary, and he may be walking down the street--whatever he's doing, he simply prays as he goes, asking questions ("Why do you do this, Lord?") and sharing his sarcasm before God ("You know I can't stand this."). His practice of prayer reminds me of Mary Oliver's beautiful poem called prayer, when she says, "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."

Prayer does not need to be fraught with formality. There are seasons of life where God calls us to reconnect with great intentionality--to go into our prayer closet, or to pray regularly with a group, as the case may be. And certainly we are gifted with great words of faithful saints who have gone before us and who even still teach us to pray. But prayer is a uniquely easy way to practice the faith. Prayer may well become the bridge between your faith life and your everyday life, because it is so accessible for practicing. It doesn't require any gear--no Bible is necessary, no plans have to be made--you can do it anywhere, in public or in private, while you are very still or while you are on the go--prayer is possible all the time. And prayer doesn't have to be a certain length in order to be acceptable--short prayers work, too.

After giving his disciples some words and some ways to pray, Jesus jumps into a story--an example--a parallel of prayer. Let's just imagine that one of you went over to your friend's house at midnight, and you banged on the door and no one answered, so you walked around to the guy's bedroom window and banged on the window, yelling, "Friend, a guest just arrived at my house and I have nothing to give him--I need three loaves of bread." Who would blame the friend for yelling back, "Listen, everybody's tucked in bed, the door's locked...Go away. I can't give you anything right now." All of us would say that's reasonable, right? We might even say that's setting good boundaries--this fall when we talked about the art of neighboring, we might have said, "Ok, this knocking on the door at midnight is on the list of things you don't do with your neighbor." But we are totally removed from the culture in which Jesus was speaking. The cultural expectation **we** have is that you don't go knocking on your neighbor's window at midnight. The cultural expectation that **Jesus** and his listeners have is that you would never deny what your neighbor needs in order to show hospitality to a guest. The neighbor would have been dishonored if he had not helped the guy out. At the end of the parable, Jesus says, "Listen, the friendship isn't enough to get this guy out of bed, but **because of his persistence**, he will get up and give the man whatever he needs." Scholars tell me that a better translation there is not persistence but "shamelessness"--because of his shamelessness, the neighbor will get up and give him whatever he needs.

Shamelessness implies a boldness rooted in familiarity (Lose). The man in the parable names what he needs--he doesn't put flowery language around it, or excuses for why he doesn't have any bread on hand, or bargains for paying the man back--he just forthrightly asks for what he needs, confident that his neighbor will uphold these cultural expectations. Jesus tells us to do the same--to learn to approach God shamelessly, boldly asking for what we need, confident that God will keep God's promises. He encourages us to approach God with boldness and familiarity.

So, then...what if the answer is no? Or what if there seems to be no answer at all?

These are some of the most difficult questions of the faith. Jesus says "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened to you." ...So what about when it's not?

I made a good friend in the office where I used to work, and one day she asked me to pray for her on a certain day, because she was having a biopsy. I told her I would, and I did. I prayed that the biopsy would come back with good results, that there would be no cancer. I also prayed for wisdom for my friend and her family, for doctors and radiologists. I prayed above all else for God to be with her, for God to reveal Godself.

I came back on Monday morning and when I walked in her door she greeted me with, "Well, that's the last time I ask you to pray for me! Your prayers stink!" She was joking of course, but the disappointment was real. How could God not have granted me this one thing? I was persistent, I was shameless, I had eighteen pastors praying for me--I did everything just right. Why not me?

Friends, there are no easy answers to these questions. We must be careful as we speak to one another about how prayer works, or about what we believe about prayer, because the truth is that we have no explanation for why some prayers seem to be answered, and others do not. Certainly there are times when what we ask for is not wise, or it will not be good for us or for those around us, and God is wise not to intervene. But how many more times are we left with no words, and no understanding.

When I read the stories in the Bible of prayers answered, I wonder about all of the unanswered prayers whose stories go untold. Hannah in the Old Testament prayed for a baby, and she gave birth to Samuel. I imagine all of the other women who felt their prayers went unheard. I think of the Israelites enslaved for generations in Egypt who cried out to God and never lived to see God's intervention. But that story in particular gives me comfort. It helps me to imagine my own prayers, my own petitions being united with all of those across space and time who have prayed for the very same thing--for a friend to be healed, for a child to live into old age, for war to cease and for the world to be made whole. It helps me to imagine that, just as some did not see the day when Israel would escape slavery in Egypt, I may not see the day when illness and death are no longer a threat, but I can trust that God hears our cries just as God has always heard the cries of God's people. I can trust that God will fulfill God's promise for redemption, for no more pain and suffering, for war to cease, and for life that never ends.

When the disciples ask Jesus, "Teach us to pray," Jesus does not tell them how to make prayer "work"--he doesn't tell them how to do it just right so that the thing you are praying for comes true. He simply teaches them to encounter God. In the end of his teaching he says, "If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him." The gift that Jesus promises is not health or wealth; it's not immunity from pain; it's not that prayer will yield results like a transaction with God. His promise is that God will be made known to us; God will come to us. In the end, this is the point of prayer. It's about realizing that we are known to God, with a deep knowing that makes it possible to be shameless before him, sharing our greatest longings right along with the frivolous little things that we want. And it's about God being known, being revealed to us through the Holy Spirit. Through prayer, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God gives us Godself. A revelation. Right here, to you, to me. Sitting in church, walking down the street, anywhere. The gift of God, to know and be known.

This isn't a contest, but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak.