

Proper 12-C  
July 25, 2010  
St. Stephen's, Spokane

When my daughters and I lived in Berkeley in the 1980s, we attended All Souls Church, not too far from the seminary. It was a wonderful parish for us – lively, full of concern for the neighborhood and a great place for Sunday worship. Except for one thing, according to my daughters, who were 11 and 13 at the time. All Souls was their first experience of the contemporary wording of the Lord's Prayer that is part of Rite II. Not radically different, but a bit different.

This was not, they argued, the Lord's prayer. It was not what we had prayed in our parish in Kennewick. It was not what they intended to pray. How dare these people at All Souls do this! they asked. How dare they change the words! Frankly, I'd not seen so much energy about anything in the liturgy from either of them, so it was kind of interesting.

Eventually they got over it, but their agitation did remind me how near and dear to us are those familiar words: "Our Father, who art in heaven..." (Or "Our Father in heaven...if you are like I am and prefer the contemporary words.) We pray them in almost every liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer from baptism to burial. They form a prayer that we call on sometimes in times of great need. A prayer that comes to us when nothing else will – on sleepless nights and in tight corners. Sometimes it is a bridge back to a prayer life after a long dry spell. Often it is a way we talk to God every day.

But today we look at this prayer in its context in the Luke's gospel. It is Jesus' response to his disciples' request that he teach them to pray. What follows is a much

shorter version of the prayer than we are used to – and perhaps one that is most faithful to its original source. Jesus prays, simply: Father, hallowed by your name. Your kingdom come; Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.

Innumerable books have been written on how this is a model for our prayer: acknowledging God’s holiness; praying for God’s reign to come; praying for what we need to sustain us; praying for forgiveness and the grace to forgive others, and to be kept from the grip of evil.

On its own, this is a wonderful model for a prayer to pray every day. But there is more in Jesus’ teaching. He continues with a story about persistence. Someone goes to a friend’s house late at night to borrow some food for an unexpected guest. The house is closed up for the night and the friend doesn’t want to come to the door, even though the person who wants the food is pounding on it. Annoying as it is, the man’s persistence pays off and he gets his loaves of bread – and we assume his friend and family finally get a decent night’s sleep.

Ask, seek, knock are familiar words of advice here when it comes to prayer. Be persistent in our asking our seeking our knocking. But Jesus is talking about more than persistence here. He is talking about more than badgering God into giving us what we think we need as though God were that grumpy friend who had to be cajoled into getting up and sharing some food.

This is really about our persistence in being in relationship with God – a persistence that mirrors God’s persistence about being in relationship with us. It is about knowing that the basis of this relationship is God’s incredible goodness.

And all of this points us back to why we pray at all. Sometimes we pray because we seem to have no other options. We're at the end of our rope. Sometimes we pray because we need something – and need it now. Sometimes we lift up our cares and concerns for someone else and let them rest in God's presence. Sometimes we carry the heavy burdens of doing things we should not have done – or not doing the things we should have done – and need release and forgiveness. Often we pray persistently simply to be in the presence of God.

The truth is that we need to pray. We need to be in the presence of God – with or without words. We don't need to reduce prayer to a science or skill as much as we simply need to BE with God -- persistently.

There's a wonderful video (old enough to be in VHS format) called simply "The Lord's Prayer" that speaks both to the familiarity of that prayer and our sense of being with God. As it begins, a woman is kneeling alone in a big church. She begins, "Our Father, who art in heaven..."

Right away a deep voice replies, "Yes." (We catch on before she does that this is God answering her prayer.)

She looks up and says, "Excuse me. I'm praying."

The voice continues, "I'm here."

And she replies, "Can't you wait until I'm done?"

The voice says, "But you called me."

And she says, "But I was just reciting the Lord's Prayer."

"But I'm answering," the voice replies.

And then she says, "This might take forever if you keep interrupting me."

“Would that be so bad?” the voice asks.

You get the idea. The rest of the video is a challenging dialogue with God about what is between the lines of the Lord’s prayer. What are we really praying for when we both listen to the words we speak and listen for how God might answer. The video is such a wonderful and humorous example of praying on automatic pilot – praying in a one-way conversation that sort of defies the notion of relationship. It’s almost as if she needs to power her way through that prayer before there is space for God.

We hope that our familiar prayers – the ones we learn like the Lord’s prayer, a favorite mantra, a prayer we have said since childhood, would be windows, allowing the light of God into our souls. That their familiarity wouldn’t be a matter of going through the motions, but an opportunity to open us up.

Asking, seeking, knocking all have to do with persistence, attentiveness and relationship. We are bold enough to address God as “Our Father.” We are bold enough to open ourselves to the presence of God and vulnerable enough to receive that presence. We are persistent enough to stay in relationship.

That’s what Jesus was teaching his disciples about as they asked him how to pray.

May we continue to know this gift of relationship as we pray our prayers – persistently. May it comfort us in stressful times, call us to a deeper sense of awareness and challenge us to live our lives with hope.