

We are bold to pray

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in the Episcopal Parish of Saint John the Evangelist, Hingham, Massachusetts on the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 28, 2019.

...one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." Luke 11:1

When one of the disciples asks Jesus to teach them to pray, he teaches them his own prayer that many of us learned as children. Those of us who don't remember learning the Lord's Prayer may feel as if we were born knowing it. The Irish theologian John Dominic Crossan has written that the Lord's Prayer is not only Christianity's greatest prayer, it is also its strangest. It is prayed by all Christians, yet it never mentions Christ. It is prayed in all churches, yet it never mentions church. It is prayed on Sundays, though it never mentions Sunday. It is prayed by fundamentalist Christians, but never mentions inspired inerrancy of the Bible. It is prayed by Evangelical Christians though it never mentions evangelism. It is prayed by both Protestants and Catholics, yet it never mentions doctrines or church hierarchy.

There are many versions of the Lord's Prayer. You may think that the one you have said all your life is from the King James Version of the Bible published in 1611, but that is different from the one we know. In whatever version, this most widely known prayer in all Christianity addresses the God who knows us better than we know ourselves, the God who loves each of us as if there were only one of us.

When we pray *hallowed by thy name*, we are praying that God's sacred name be revered and honored. I take seriously the commandment against taking God's name in vain by using it to invoke malice. Because the name of God is holy, it must never be blasphemed in cursing and swearing. To do so is to ask God to condemn or destroy part of God's creation. This is God's universe and not ours. We are tenants in our particular place and time. Because we are addressing the One who brought us into being who redeems and sustains us, we approach God's name with reverence and awe.

When we pray, *thy will be done*, we are speaking of our Creator's relationship with all humanity. We are praying that God's will be accomplished here on earth. Rather than a physical place, our relationship with the heavenly realm is a bond that began at our baptism and continues on into eternity. God's realm exists on its own and we pray that we follow God's will that heaven and earth are brought closer together.

Give us this day our daily bread. We pray for daily sustenance represented in bread as our most basic sustenance. When you receive the bread in the sacrament today, it represents the whole person of Christ who provides us with all our basic physical and spiritual needs.

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. When we alienate ourselves from God through sin, we ask for forgiveness and reconciliation. This is the only part of the Lord's Prayer that is conditional. If we accept our own forgiveness, we must be willing to forgive others. If it doesn't work both ways it doesn't work at all.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. We are asking to be spared when we are facing trials and temptations. There is no sin in being tempted, only in yielding to it. God leads us through those times when we are sorely tempted to do what we know is wrong. Rather than asking to be saved from trials and judgment, we pray that God will lead us to be delivered from evil.

Prayer can be through our thoughts or actions, with or without words. The object of prayer is not to tell God what to do. Nor should we try to second-guess what God intends for us. Most of us have been angry with God at some point in our lives and need to remember that God's love for us is always greater than our anger. When we find our faith ebbing, it is important to stay in contact with God, especially when distracted by doubt and uncertainty. Though we may at times pull away, God never abandons us.

Jesus encourages us to ask for our own needs when he teaches, *Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.* (Luke 11:9-10) Though our needs are known to God before we ask; it is still important make them known. No matter what our need or concern, we must never feel that what we ask is unimportant or that we are not worthy to ask. Our prayers are not always answered the way we want. They are answered either "yes," "no," or "wait." When we are initially disappointed that our prayer is not answered the way we want, we may in time realize in time that it was the right answer after all.

If you feel that your personal prayer life is like "The Wreck of the Hesperus," when you are feeling overwhelmed and pulled in all directions, stop; take a deep breath and focus. Too often we only turn to prayer when we are desperate and helpless. A good practice is to set aside a regular time and place where you can pray and work through what is going on in your life. If you find that you are not as articulate in prayer as you want to be, try writing your own prayers to fit a particular occasion or need.

An ancient Christian proverb in Latin is: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. Loosely translated, it means that the rule of prayer precedes the rule of belief. When we pray earnestly, we grow in faith. There is so much in life that is difficult to understand. We pray to try to accept those things in the hope and expectation that we will grow in understanding and belief.

To remember all those for whom you want to pray, keep a list of names of those you love and care for and pray for them by name. It can be helpful to keep a small notebook with their names and birthdays and any special concerns.

The story of our lives is like a book that we are writing as we move along through life. There is only one edition and there are no revisions. It has to be completely authentic. We can't edit the story of our past; we can only improve the narrative as we go along. And remember this: when that well-worn book of the story of your life is bound together with prayer, it is less likely to unravel.

