

“Our Father” Sermon on Sunday, July 24, 2022

Dear church,

How do you pray? Do you have a favorite prayer, a special time of day, or even some sort of prayer technique? Richard Rohr once shared an experience about going to a Buddhist meditation seminar. He recalled that, upon arrival, before any coffee was offered or any small talk or other pleasantries were exchanged, the person at the desk asked him point blank, “What’s your technique?” In meditation circles it matters how people breathe, how they situate themselves, what they focus on or not, which mantras they use, especially in the Eastern religions. Techniques are taught and passed on from teacher to student.

In comparison, it seems that Christians and Jews tend to pay more attention to the words we’re using when we pray. Sometimes we pay too much attention to the words, as if God didn’t already know what we are trying to say, as if somehow saying the right words might be more convincing, as if God were our English grammar teacher about to give us a bad grade, as if the ultimate WORD of God had not already been spoken in the death and resurrection of Christ. Our words can only ever try to capture what is truly needed. With so many words, we try to express ourselves to God faithfully, if imperfectly, every Sunday. And even as we pray, we might say, “Lord, help us to pray!” It doesn’t necessarily come as natural to us as some other things in life. We all need some guidance.

In today’s gospel, an unnamed disciple asks Jesus to instruct him in the art of prayer. And Jesus, Jewish teacher to the core, feeds him some good words, the opening lines of the Lord’s Prayer. I am not sure, to be honest, whether our Lord actually used this prayer on a regular basis like we might expect or whether he just came up with it when this person asked him, sort of like a quick link to get him on the right track. “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.” The Lukan version of this prayer only offers a few humble bullet points. “Give us each day our daily bread.” “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.” “Lead us not into temptation.” That’s all! You can see, this version of the Lord’s Prayer is still under construction, unfinished and not quite so polished

as the prayer we use every Sunday in church. And yet, these few phrases in the gospel of Luke may well represent the original prayer Jesus used. Isn't that comforting? Even Jesus' own prayers were under construction - not perfect, not complete but rather simple. And do you think Jesus minded that some poetically minded person took his words and expanded them, making them sound a bit more majestic? "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever..." I think he would have said, "Go for it. This is not about me, it's about the Kingdom of God and we are all in it together!"

Here is one little piece of language that's actually important. Whether we are alone or in church, we always begin with "Our Father," not "My Father." It's a communal prayer, and I love the fact that it's practiced across various Christian denominations, bringing us together, despite all of our self-important differences. A few hundred yard up on Main Street, the people of St. Rose are praying this prayer; they use the exact same words, I believe. The Baptists down on Shearer Street recite it faithfully every Sunday. Methodists, Mennonites, Presbyterians and Reformed churches include the Lord's Prayer in their services. Eastern Orthodox Churches and even the less formal, non-denominational Christians teach it. This is a truly ecumenical prayer that goes around the world. What they used to say about the British Empire in its hay day; that the sun never sets on the empire because it included provinces in almost all time zones of the planet, well it remains true for this prayer. The Lord's Prayer is spoken somewhere on this planet by some Christian person or community at all times. It binds us together. God is truly "Our" Father, not a spiritual projection of our self-fulfillment fantasies. God is much more **our** Father and Mother than **my** father and mother.

This passage in Luke offers some additional teaching material, which emphasizes that prayer goes beyond words or techniques. It's about relationship. When we pray we are never to doubt that God is on our side, no matter what life is throwing at us and no matter the outcome of our most fervent prayer petitions, no matter wars and violence and own wretched mistakes. God is still, amazingly on our side. Jesus drives home that point. "Would a father give his child a snake when the child asks for a fish," he asks. Of course not. Parents, unless they have some very serious problems, generally want the very best

for their children, right? Jesus says: God is like that. And so, the words and techniques of prayer, important as they may be, dwarf against the most fundamental learning experience as we pray: to trust God; to feel the sacred energy of God's presence; to become one of God's favorite dwelling places. Those who experience that level of intimacy often report that they have turned to silence, that the words are almost in the way of their communion with God. But for most of us, they are still very helpful, good crutches as we limp into God's arms and say, "Our Father, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come!"

Amen.