

Proper 12C
July 28, 2019
St. John's Cathedral

Back in the 1970s when I was in the earliest part of the ordination process I was invited to come to Spokane to be interviewed by the Commission on Ministry – the diocesan group that oversees the path toward ordination. This was a big deal. The commission would recommend to the bishop whether or not I should go ahead.

When I got to Paulsen House, the group was meeting in the bishop's office on a Friday night. I waited in the parlor for my summons. I was pretty nervous. A lot was at stake. And when I was invited in, the man leading the meeting said, "We haven't had our opening prayer yet. Would you please lead us?"

Then came a long pause – an awkward, embarrassed silence. I had gone completely blank in the tension of that moment. How would such a rookie, an introvert fresh off a 3-hour drive, call a room full of clergy and diocesan leaders to prayer in the bishop's office?

After a while (probably about a minute that felt like an eternity) a kind priest from Yakima intervened and suggested that this might not be the best way to welcome an applicant, and offered to pray. I nodded my grateful acceptance, and concluded that my ordination process ship had gone down in flames. Fortunately it had not. And over time, my ability to pray spontaneously improved. But I'm sure that somewhere in the back of my mind in that moment the words from Jesus' disciples in today's gospel were taking shape: Lord, teach us to pray. It wasn't that I didn't know how to pray. The public side of my prayer life needed some practice.

As Luke describes the moment when this question came to Jesus, Jesus answered it with a prayer --and then some teaching. It is not a discourse on technique. It's more of a teaching on relationship. Our relationship with God.

The prayer he gives them is a familiar one to us – what we call the Lord's Prayer. It might be our most familiar prayer – one many of us learned in childhood and one that appears in almost every form of liturgy in our prayer book.

It is a prayer that we likely call on in times when we just need to pray – a time of distress, or emptiness, or grief or joy. At times when we wake up in the middle of the night. At the bedside of a sick or dying friend or family member. In a way this prayer has probably formed us over many years.

And at its core is the assumption that we have a kind of intimacy with God – that we are invited to address God as Father -- or parent. (One of the Catholic churches here in Spokane in its liturgical life has addressed "God our Father and Mother of us all." Our own slow work on language in liturgy has also focused on the relationship with God more than a particular gender. And that relationship is one that invites our vulnerability and trust – invites us to come 'as we are' to the One who loves us deeply and wishes the best for us. One that creates a lot of welcoming space for prayer.

Jesus continues his teaching to say, in essence, 'stick with your prayer – be persistent. Persevere. But not too far under the surface of his story is another example of intimacy. The person seeking the bread late at night is not a stranger but a friend. There is a presumption that a friend would respond to this impertinent nighttime request and eventually does. When

I hear his example of going to a friend's house asking for bread after everyone has gone to bed, (bread that was necessary to provide hospitality) I think about the time I called a trusted friend and neighbor at 2 a.m. – the first time one of my children work up with stomach flu. “What do I do?” I asked. I probably would not have called a stranger. My neighbor was more receptive than the man in Jesus' example, but ultimately in the story Jesus told, persistence would pay off. Keep praying seems to be the bottom line here. Don't give up. Sustain the relationship by staying in conversation with God.

And the relationship is also at the center of Jesus' next piece of teaching. “Ask and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened. Volumes have been written to justify that these words don't reduce prayer to something like ordering from Amazon. These words of Jesus move us beyond persistence or even our neediness. They remind us that we trust God to give us what we need because we are God's beloved ones.

Whether it is our personal prayers our prayers together – our corporate prayer life as we gather to worship, our prayer always emerges from what we know of God, even if we don't think we know much about God. Who hasn't prayed in the middle of a sleepless night to God – whoever you are, wherever you are? Who hasn't, from time to time, kind of shouted at God? Are you there?

Over time we come to know about God by way of a relationship that grows throughout our lives, even though some of us get a later start. Prayer is a spiritual practice for sure, but far more. Certainly more than going through the motions. More dynamic, more relational, more enduring, more inviting. What we have come to know about God shapes our prayer life. How

we pray together, as part of a church that has a collection of familiar prayers in its prayer book -- at the center of its liturgy-- shapes us as well.

Our collect for today, the prayer at the opening of our liturgy, began, “O God, the protector of all who put their trust in you...”. This is something we have come to know about God. We can trust God. God is our protector. We are strengthened and encouraged by knowing this – and perhaps opened to a deeper kind of communication in our prayer.

Other collects in the prayer book address God as merciful, almighty, loving Father and more. Prayers in the New Zealand Prayer Book, in its contemporary revision, addresses God with a wider range of names – a range that might stretch our religious imaginations in a good way: God of New and Old; Jesus our Guide; Gentle God; God of delight; God the Mother and Father of us all.

When I was asked a few years ago to compose prayers for churches in this diocese to pray in the process that led toward electing a new bishop, the first one began, “God of our journeys”. I hoped that would help us remember as we prayed, that God is always part of our journeys and also guiding us through the journey of that particular transition of choosing a bishop – always a profound time for dioceses.

How have you come to know God? How do you name God in your prayer – if you do? How does a sense of intimacy grow in you as you are called to prayer?

Some of you may remember Dorothy Marsden, a longtime member of this parish who died 25 years ago and whose generosity established the Marsden scholarship fund. Late in her life Dorothy had a stroke that limited her speech severely. There were just a few phrases that

she could say. And I'm sure that was frustrating for a woman who through her life had a lot of things to say.

The phrase we heard most was, "Dear God!" Often she would say that and look up – as if she were looking into heaven. I always thought that Dorothy was sharing a bit of her prayer life with us with that simple phrase, "Dear God." God to her was a 'dear one.'

I'm not sure I know much about prayer even though I own an embarrassingly large number of books on the topic. I've been a spiritual director for years, but I think I learn at least as much from the those I have directed than they have ever learned from me.

What I do know, though, is that prayer looks a little different to everyone. There isn't a 'right' way to do it because it isn't a technique, but a relationship. A growing, changing relationship to the one we know as God – The one who loves life into us and invites us to share that love with others.

And so we continue to ask, prayerfully, "Teach us to pray."