

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

Luke 11:1-4

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“Lord, teach us to pray.” Have you ever asked that? It’s what the disciples ask Jesus before he offers what we now know as the Lord’s Prayer. Luke’s account of this story includes that direct question. Matthew’s account does not, though the prayer as he records it is a bit longer, a bit closer to what we pray together each week. That question, that request, from the disciples, though — I think it’s something we’ve all uttered at some time or another. “Teach us to pray.” Maybe when you’ve said it, it sounded a little different. Maybe more like, “Lord, I’m bad at this.” Barbara Brown Taylor, the renowned preacher, priest, and theologian, calls herself “a prayer failure.” She says she’d rather show someone her bank account than talk about her prayer life. Maybe for you, the disciples words get expressed more like, “Lord, how is this supposed to work?” Or, “Lord, are you kidding me?” Or, “Lord, what difference is this really making?” If that sounds familiar, it’s okay. All of those declarations, all of those questions, are just variations on the same theme: “Lord, teach us to pray.”

We’ll be talking about prayer for the next several weeks. We’ll think through what prayer really means and why we’re instructed to pray for those we might least want to, and how to keep praying when it seems to be doing nothing, and what to do when prayer just feels flat out impossible. If I am being honest, when I think about what we most need to talk about as a community, and as a world, and as a church, there are a lot of things that come to mind. Lord, teach us to love guns less and the planet more. Lord, teach us how to heal a divided country. Lord, teach us to release our need to be right. Lord, teach us how to make a difference. Lord, teach us how to mend broken hearts and busted lives. But maybe, just maybe, all of that is rooted somewhere within “Lord, teach us to pray.”

There’s a lot to be learned from just the first word of Jesus’ prayer. From the way we’re instructed to address God: “Father.” Or as in Matthew: “Our Father.” We’ve said it a million times, and the novelty has worn off, but it stands in sharp contrast to how those living in the shadow of the Roman Empire were required to address Caesar. Historical documents tell us those addresses sounded something like this: “Emperor Caesar Flavius Valerius Constantine, Pius, Felix, Invictus, Augustus, Pontifex Maximus, Tribune of the people, Emperor, Consul, Conqueror, Lord of his country, proconsul” and it just keeps going for a good while longer. Jesus’ address is way shorter and it dispenses with all the flattery and buttering up. He says, just begin this way: “Father.” “Our Father.” Jesus says that prayer begins not with an acknowledgement of status, but with an acknowledgement of relationship. Praying this prayer is about using our words to name out loud who God is and who we are — just like we celebrated three times over at the baptismal font this morning. Father. Child.

Now, I know for as important a declaration as that is, it can be a fraught one. If the father/child relationship is not one that reminds you of comfort and provision, I hope you can be like an old friend of mine, Emma.

Emma, when I knew her, was five years old. My colleague Meg and I were teaching a baptism class. It included a lot of parents and a handful of young children, too. We were trying to help the littlest ones understand that we belong to a God who loves us deeply. Meg read the book *Runaway Bunny*, reminding

them that no matter where they go, we can never escape God's love. We can never lose God's love. And then we asked the kids to take a piece of paper and copy down a phrase we had hanging on the wall: "I am a child of God." Emma took her time. A long time; longer than anyone else. And when she turned her paper around, it read: "I am a KID of God!" With an exclamation point. "I'm not a child," she said. "I'm a KID!" The vocabulary didn't work for Emma, but even still, she held on to the meaning.

Let us learn from Emma and be expansive in our language. To do so is tremendously faithful, because God's love is the most expansive thing we know. If child doesn't work for you, you can be God's KID! If Father is too hard, you can say Mother. Parent. All of that language is found in scripture, too. Or you can use the word Jesus actually used — Abba, an Aramaic term of endearment. Whatever language you use, whatever word you use, put that exclamation point at the end. Because that relationship, that connection, is not just the beginning of the prayer. It is the foundation from which we live every other moment of our lives. And it is the launching pad for some of the enormous petitions that show up in the rest of this prayer:

Reveal who you are. Show us the way to live, and give us the courage to follow the path you offer. Set the world right. Infuse this world with the holiness of heaven. Give us what we need. Give us exactly what we need, and give us the ability to not want more than we need. Give us just enough, so that everyone will have enough. Forgive us from all the baggage that keeps us from being our truest, best selves. Help us to relieve others of their baggage, too, so that everyone not only has everything they need, no one has more than they can bear. And if we are to be that vulnerable with one another, and if we are to be that vulnerable with you, O God, if we are to drop our defenses in order to pursue your way of peace, protect us from all that which threatens to hurt us or harm us. We are yours, O God, so hold us close and do not let us go. Keep us connected to one another, and keep us connected to you.

That's a doozy of a prayer. So much so that an old Christian theologian, Tertullian, said the Lord's Prayer was a shorthand version of the Gospel as a whole. That's probably why Jesus said it all in as few words as possible — in words we can know by heart.

It's like the address and phone number of the house I grew up in. I haven't lived there in more than half my life. That phone number was a landline, and it was disconnected years ago. But even still: 16274 Blue Skies Drive. 734-591-6013. Those words roll off my tongue without my even having to think. And those words, in their own way, always welcome me home.

Because words are almost always more than just words. I officiated a wedding here on these steps two weekends ago. Helen and Trey spoke promises aloud to one another, and then I spoke a proclamation and a blessing over them. We stood here together, and we said a bunch of words. But Helen and Trey left this Sanctuary different than when they came in.

I wonder if prayer is something like that. That when Jesus teaches us to pray, yes, it's a bunch of words — but maybe he's teaching us much more than that. No less a theologian than Karl Barth believed, "To fold one's hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world." What if prayer really does make things happen? What if prayer really does make us different? We'll keep talking about that in the weeks to come. But in the meantime? Lord, we are your kids! So teach us to pray.