

In addition to when we attend church services, I am certain that all of us pray from time to time, and I am also certain that all of us pray differently. Happily, there is no absolutely right, or wrong, way to pray.

One of my first experiences seeing how people need to pray in their own way took place about 33 years ago when I was a student chaplain at University Hospital. For several months that summer my job was to visit any patients who might be seeking pastoral support. I was largely clueless as to what I was doing, but I did have a captive audience of bed-bound people who could not physically escape my fumbled attempts at ministry no matter how incompetent I might be.

There was one especially pleasant man – a Baptist – who I visited several times during his two-week stay at the hospital. At the end of each of our little chats at his bedside, I would offer to say a prayer, and he always graciously accepted, whereupon I would mutter at a snail’s pace whatever extemporaneous and no doubt largely incoherent thoughts I managed to piece together in my head. This nice Baptist man always seemed appreciative of my efforts.

When I visited him for the final time, the day before he was scheduled to be discharged from the hospital, he was in good spirits. His treatment had gone well, and he was soon headed for home, but at the end of that visit, before I could make my usual offer of a prayer he jumped in and said, “Today, I will say the prayer, if you don’t mind.” I agreed, of course, and he began to pray. It was like a verbal dam had burst. The words poured from his mouth, faster and faster, as he offered up praises and exultations and petitions to God for what seemed an eternity. Evidently, on the eve of his release from hospital, he needed to be spared any more of my placid, pokey, pathetic attempts at prayer. He seemed to be saying to me, “Boy, it is time that you learned to pray properly at the bedside of a master. Listen and learn!”

Looking back on that event, I realize that even if that lovely Baptist man whose name I have long since forgotten did not teach me how to pray, he helped me to understand that all of us need to pray in our own way, and there is not a totally right or wrong way to pray.

Our prayers are as varied as our lives. Each of us prays at various times, in various ways, using a variety of prayers. Some people pray before meals. Some pray while driving or standing in line at the grocery checkout. Some pray when trying to cope with life’s pressures and challenges. Some pray to celebrate joys. Some pray as soon as they wake up in the morning. For some, prayer is the last thing they do before falling asleep at night. And there are a thousand other times and places and circumstances in which we might pray.

But the common denominator linking all our many variations of prayer is that the person who is praying opens themselves to the possibility of God’s life-giving spirit being released in them.

In today’s gospel reading, when the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, he taught them the Lord’s Prayer. It is the prayer for all Christians in all circumstances. A central message of Jesus’ life was the necessity of developing a personal relationship with God. A relationship so intimate that when the disciples asked him how they should pray, Jesus said they should refer to God as “Abba.” Which would have surprised the disciples because “Abba” was a familiar yet childish term – something like our English word “daddy.” When you say the Lord’s Prayer try starting it off with “daddy” instead of “our Father” and see how that changes the whole tone and feel of your prayer.

Jesus was portraying God as close and approachable and loving. As a God with whom we can be comfortable. A God in whom we can trust and rely.

After telling the disciples how to pray, Jesus told them a story to emphasize his point. Jesus said to imagine that a friend arrives at your door late at night, and since you do not have any food on hand to offer him, you in turn knock on your neighbor’s door to ask for some bread. But your neighbor at first

refuses to answer. He does not want to wake up everyone in his household by stumbling around in the dark to unbar the door. Yet you persist. You keep knocking and calling and knocking and calling until finally your neighbor gets out of bed, hears your request, and grants you the bread you are seeking, not because of friendliness or neighborliness, but to shut you up because you have been so persistent.

It is easy to identify with the person who did not want to be roused from his bed in the middle of the night. None of us like inconveniences, interruptions, or irritations. It is not that we are insensitive to any cry for help. Sometimes we just do not want to be bothered. If that is how we think and behave at times, it is only natural for us to assume that God also can be reluctant to answer and slow to act at times.

However, in telling the story of the persistent door-knocking neighbor, Jesus is assuring us that God is not like that. While God's time is not always measured in our time, and God at times seems to us slow to act or perhaps not present at all, Jesus assures us that God always hears us and always responds, in a way that is best for us. Is Jesus urging us to be persistent in prayer as a means of nagging God into fulfilling our wishes? Wearing down God's resistance? Changing the indifferent mind of a reluctant God? The answer is no, no, and no.

Our being persistent in prayer is not about God, it is about us. We should not assume that God is at our every beck and call, and that if we ask then God dutifully responds exactly as we prefer. If that were the case, our prayers would become nothing more than easy shortcuts that reinforce our own thoughts, rather than the means for entering a real and meaningful relationship with God, a God who might not be answering our prayers exactly as asked, but instead chooses to teach us something about patience or tolerance or understanding.

Perseverance in prayer is not our rude and obstinate pounding on heaven's door, selfishly demanding that God work things out for us according to our wishes. Instead, perseverance in prayer is about moving away from our own pettiness and selfishness and accepting God's will and wisdom and goodness and love for us. Through our prayers we are to ask and keep on asking; to search and keep on searching; to knock and to keep on knocking. Not as an attempt to overcome God's reluctance, but to expand our own capacity to receive God's grace.

Archbishop William Temple once said that the underlying message for all our prayers should not be "Please God, do for me what I want," but rather, "Please God, do in me, with me, and through me that which you want." Or, as Jesus prayed at his moment of greatest turmoil and uncertainty mere hours before his death, "Not my will, God, but yours be done."

All of us know for a fact that our prayers are not always – and perhaps not often – answered in ways we had hoped. Are there any among us who have not at some time of intense worry and desperation asked God for healing, or understanding, or a satisfactory resolution to some sort of problem, and yet we did not receive what was requested? At those times more than ever we need to remember that the purpose of prayer is not for us to change God, but for God to change us. As was once said, "Prayer may not change things for you, but it certainly changes you for things." In order for that to be true, we need to approach prayer honestly and believing totally that our God, our "Abba," will provide the outcome that is best for us.

There is a story about a rural and seemingly religious farming community that was suffering through a terrible drought. Its crops were dying from lack of rain. In desperation, the local pastor announced that the entire community planned to gather at the edge of one of the fields and pray for rain. Once a large crowd had gathered, the pastor climbed up on a fence and shouted, "Brothers and sisters, you have come here to pray for rain!" The crowd hollered back at him, "Amen! We will pray for rain!" The preacher asked them, "Do you have faith? Do you possess sufficient faith to pray for rain?" The crowd again roared, "Amen! Amen! We will pray for rain!" "All right," the preacher said. "But first, I have one question to ask you." The crowd stood silent, awaiting the question. "Brothers and sisters," shouted the preacher, "if you have faith that God answers prayers, where are your umbrellas?"

If we pray often enough and truthfully enough, we will eventually develop the close relationship with God that Jesus taught is the end goal of faith. If we pray often enough and truthfully enough, prayer will become as natural to us as breathing. It will cease to be an obligation, or a discipline, or something we do only at certain times and places.

As Christians we are to pray frequently. Always a good place to begin is with that first prayer Jesus taught us, about which I leave you with these thoughts:

I cannot pray “Our,” if my faith has no room for others and their need.

I cannot pray “Father,” if I do not demonstrate this relationship to God in my daily living.

I cannot pray “who art in heaven,” if all of my interests and pursuits are on earthly things.

I cannot pray “hallowed be thy name,” if I am not striving, with God’s help, to be holy.

I cannot pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done,” if I am unwilling to accept God’s rule in my life.

I cannot pray “on earth as it is in Heaven,” unless I am truly ready to give myself to God’s service here and now.

I cannot pray “give us this day our daily bread,” without first expending honest effort to acquire it, or if I would withhold from my neighbor the bread that I do receive.

I cannot pray “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” if I continue to harbor a grudge against anyone.

I cannot pray “lead us not into temptation,” if I deliberately choose to remain in situations where I am likely to be tempted.

I cannot pray “deliver us from evil,” if I am not prepared to fight evil with my life and my prayer.

I cannot pray “thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,” if I am seeking power for myself and my own glory first.

I cannot pray “forever and ever,” if I am too anxious about the present day’s affairs.

I cannot pray “Amen,” unless I honestly say, “Cost what it may, this is my prayer.”

I do pray that all of us are honest and persistent in our prayers today and in the days ahead. **Amen.**

**7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**24 July 2022**

**Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming**