

Note: *This is the sermon from last week, July 24.*

**Introduction**

In the face of devastating events and in our polarized political climate, “prayer” has become code for: “I don’t know what else to say.” or “I want to say something neutral and inoffensive,” or “I don’t want to take action.” So often politicians, leaders, even clergy people offer “thoughts and prayers” in response to tragedy or injustice because it is the easiest thing to do. But today we hear loud and clear, that Jesus didn’t teach us to pray so that we would be passive but active!

**The Word**

In today’s Gospel St. Luke recalls at least three things Jesus had to say about prayer: the first gives us what today we call the Lord’s prayer. The second is a story about being persistent and even obnoxious when it comes to prayer, and then there are couple of sayings about doors open and closed and how asking in prayer and receiving are related to each other.

First, let’s explore the disciples’ request that Jesus give them this prayer. In a way it was very strange that this was necessary at all. For his disciples were already believers who prayed and knew the importance of prayer. They had learned it from childhood and were accustomed to fixed times of prayer throughout the day, as well as more general prayers, remarkably similar to the Our Father. Though familiar with this, they wanted to hear what Jesus thought about what was most important when it came to prayer.

And so, he gave them this “model” prayer, yet, as if to illustrate that true prayer is not simply about words, but about what lies beneath the words, note that the New Testament actually gives us two different versions of the Lord's Prayer, none of which are exactly like what we use today. In Matthew, God is addressed as OUR father, whereas in Luke it is simply Father. Matthew includes the petition asking that God’s will be done on earth as in heaven, whereas Luke omits this altogether. Both have similar petitions relating to praying that God’s kingdom come, that we receive our daily bread, and that we ask God to forgive our sins or debts, as we strive to forgive those of others. Finally, both conclude with a petition that we may not be put to the test, but only Matthew’s version adds to this, that we be delivered from evil. And, of course, neither of these versions end with the doxology we use to conclude the prayer today. Yet, despite these differences, the Lord's Prayer is a model for prayer of Christians and spans the world through Christians wherever we meet or pray, whether in churches,

prayer groups or in the privacy of our homes. Knowing this helps us to stay connected to one another and to God--attentive to God's presence in our lives and world.

Jesus next follows up this model prayer with a story, in which he reminds followers to be persistent in prayer and even to the point of being obnoxious. According to this teaching of Jesus prayer is meant to be bold, persistent, uncomfortable; it's meant to get results. If God is like a neighbor or friend, we know that persistence gets results! Remember, as well, that in Jesus had no intention to confine our prayers to this one prayer, as if we parrot or say it by rote, without understanding the intentions in the prayer or letting prayer be the vehicle for us to speak and **listen** to God, which leads us to a third point.

As Jesus further says in today's Gospel from Luke, "Ask, and it will be given to 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." On the one hand, we ask for what concerns and moves us, our daily bread, our guilt, our temptation, and our struggle with evil. In this sense, prayer is a very personal thing between God and us. That is why Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, for example, said: "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door."

On the other hand, we are not alone before God. We do not say **My** Father, but **Our** Father. We pray "Give **US** our daily bread" not "give **me** my daily bread." Thus, following this reasoning, our prayers and intercession to God for others wherever they may be, and whenever we learn or witness happenings in this world that run contrary to what God seeks for humanity. Christians pray not only for other Christians, but for all people and their needs, wherever there is oppression, loss, disaster, struggles, or death.

## **The World**

So, how shall we pray? What shall we pray? Luther certainly wanted private prayer to be a daily practice. He wrote: "In the morning, as you get out of bed, bless yourself with the sign of the cross and say: "May God bless this day, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen." Then, say the Our Father. And at the other end of the day Luther wrote: "Train yourself to say the Lord's Prayer in the evening, as you got to bed and fall asleep ..." In other words, this kind of prayer is a type of daily bread in our lives, which grounds our relationship with God and strengthens and deepens it. While observing these or other fixed times of prayer can be helpful, but it is not necessary, as prayer is really about constantly turning to God in the midst of all that fills our days.

In short, this private practice of piety, is more than just a conversation with God, because throughout history, both private prayer and the prayers of the faithful

have been both the fuel and the encouragement that has inspired remarkable action in the world. It is the energy and life-force behind a movement of social change. Prayer is not meant to stay just between us and God. Our prayers need to have feet and hands. Prayer is the practice of seeking God's presence and guidance as we work toward creating a better world. Prayer is one way we know God is with us, even when the challenges ahead seem insurmountable.

At such times, as Paul says in Romans 8, "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." As we face the tough realities that we and our world experience every day, we often feel powerless, are unsure of what is happening or what we can and do find ourselves at a loss for words and for actions. At such moments when we feel that God has abandoned us or others, we are counseled to remember the Spirit, still active and present in our groans, our sighs, our frustrations, and our fears.

This is one of the most helpful thoughts about prayer for me personally, as I currently feel increasingly devastated and helpless about what is happening, especially in our own country right now and in Ukraine among other places. Sometimes even in our despair all we can do is trust that God's Spirit is alive and well, in us and others, and will indeed lead us to answers and actions, where we see no road ahead. When we pray "**Your** kingdom come, **your** will be done, on **earth** as it is in heaven..." it means that we are in touch with other people in the community of Christ and connected to the entire world. Whenever we pray for loved ones, for strangers, for crises and catastrophes wherever they occur, we are committing ourselves to actively participate in God's will for the entire world. Again, whenever we gather, or whenever we are at home, at work, watching the news, and or see events unfolding online, we are called not just to pray, but also called to action – called to share with others our concerns for those near or far who need of our prayers, our support, and our actions.

Finally, prayer is not even as much about asking or receiving, as it is about praising and worshiping God and then LISTENING and thanking God for all that is unfolding to bring about God's will. The Lord's prayer begins with praise: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." And it ends with praise: "For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever ..." So, too, Paul in Philippians 4:6 reminds us, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Not only prayer to God but also the praise of God animates our heart and lips. On this point Luther says: "We cannot give God anything but praise and thanks, for everything else we receive from God, be it grace, words, works, Gospel, faith, and all things. Moreover, praising and thanking is also the one

proper, Christian form of service to God.” Note that the German word Luther used here was ‘*Gottesdienst*’ which literally in English is our word worship service. When we stress worship as being something separate from service to God and others, we are not hearing the deep truth of what Luther meant.

## **Closing**

In conclusion, it is not simply thinking or talking about prayer that helps us pray, but rather the practical experience of praying day in, day out, in words spoken, in silences, and in sighs, tears and even laughter. A good place to start is to pray the Lord's Prayer every day. As the great theologian, Helmut Thielicke, very aptly wrote: “The Lord’s Prayer is the prayer that spans the world!” But we really must expand this understanding of it as a prayer that spans not only the globe, but also calls us to embrace the whole world--in all of its joys and sorrows, blessings, and tribulations, and hopes and fears. Inspired by today’s gospel, may we as Christians pray for all people in the world in need of the comfort and care, **and** live out our prayer through support and actions that are effective in making God’s will a reality, not just in heaven, but right here on earth!

Amen.