

Struggling with Prayer

Pentecost 7 (Proper 12C)

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"Lord, teach us to pray." That is the heartfelt request of an unnamed disciple in this morning's Gospel reading. I think we can all identify with that request. Prayer is a foundational part of our lives as children of God. Yet many of us struggle with prayer — how to do it, when to do it, whether it's worth doing it.

I'd like to offer today some thoughts that I will hope will ease our struggles and guide us to making prayer a richer part of our faith practices. But first, I should say I don't claim to know how each of us should pray or what exactly God wants to hear from us. One of my favorite bits of wisdom is from Rabbi Harold Kushner, who says, "Beware the man who claims to know the mind of God."

Words to live by — not least because prayer is highly personal. Our Episcopal Catechism defines prayer as "responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words." There is much to ponder there, but hold onto this: Each of us responds to God — hears God's call, and responds — in our own way.

For many of us, the corporate or community prayers of our Episcopal tradition bring us closer to God. That is the basis of this service of Morning Prayer — it's what has brought us here today. The majestic words of our Prayer Book, recited together or listened to, take us to that transcendent place of Oneness with God. We respond to God's majesty and grace through the beautifully crafted phrases that our ancestors have given us.

We who organize this service make a sincere effort to incorporate "back of the book prayers" — the ones from page 800 and something, which we rarely read or hear. For all of us, taking time to read these prayers, to discover the riches that are in the Prayer Book, can bring us closer to God.

But sometimes, we want to offer our own prayers — to engage directly in that call and response with God. And I think this is where we most struggle. We feel we're inarticulate. We judge our thoughts and our feelings, and end up muddled and discouraged. The problem, I think, is that we tend to make prayer too complicated when really, all that's needed is an open and listening heart, and sincerity — a willingness to present our authentic selves to God, every day. Our *authentic* selves to God, every day.

It doesn't have to be complicated. The writer Anne Lamott says the only prayers we really need are "Help," "Thanks" and "Wow." If you feel the need to think or say more, the language doesn't have to be perfect. There is a saying from the Hasidic tradition of Judaism that will resonate with anyone — all of us — who have delighted in the sweet babbling of a toddler. The saying goes, "A father has a young child whom he greatly loves. Even though the child has hardly learned to speak, his father takes pleasure in listening to the child's words."

Now, in today's first reading, we hear a very different sort of prayer. This is yet another of those ancient Scripture tales that is oddly fascinating, or at least fascinatingly odd. God has vowed to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. But Abraham pleads with God, saying that if fifty righteous people could be found in Sodom, would it not be worth preserving the city for their sake? God agrees. Abraham doesn't stop; he persists, saying, what if there are only forty-five righteous people — wouldn't you still want to preserve the city? From there, Abraham's conversation with God starts to sound like haggling in a bazaar or a used car dealership.

This story is worth reading. Because it shows us the very close relationship Abraham has with God — a relationship so close that Abraham doesn't shy away from speaking directly, for pleading from his heart. Abraham is his authentic self with God. And Abraham is persistent.

Persistence is also at the heart of our Gospel reading, in Jesus's teaching after he gives us the Lord's Prayer. We need to be careful here not to interpret the teachings too literally. Jesus is not likening God to an impatient man who's already in bed but grudgingly gives his persistent friend some bread. The point of this parable is the power of persistence. It's often said that prayer is like physical exercise; the more you do, the more spiritual muscle you build. The closer you feel to God.

And then we have the familiar words, "Ask, and it will be given you ... For everyone who asks receives ...". It probably goes without saying that this is not a Janis Joplin "O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz" situation. Jesus is speaking about the Holy Spirit, which is given as a gift. This speaks to an authentic, never-ceasing seeking of the Holy Spirit, of Oneness with God.

When we live every day with open hearts, receptive to the presence of God in every person and every thing, we find ourselves "responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words." That is prayer. Amen.

--Barbara Toman