

Lord, Teach Me

When folks I had known a long time first realized that I had entered seminary, I became the go to person to lead any public prayer—that is still the case, unless the entire group is clergy. Somewhat later, during conversations I would be sometimes be approached by someone telling me that they just didn't know how to pray. I first assumed that this referred to a feeling of being uncomfortable with being asked to pray in public. In some instances that was the case, but in others it seemed that folks felt that there was a proper way to pray; that there must be some sort of Emily Post etiquette to follow in order to avoid offending God. It seems that this is not an unusual situation. The text from Luke's gospel this morning begins with a request from one of the disciples; which disciple wanting to know this is not named. For all the seeming specifics given within the narrative, Luke actually is sometimes rather sparse with the details. Reports of Jesus praying in the gospels are often of him going alone to communicate—to speak with the Father. This passage begins by telling us that Jesus was praying in a certain place; which in a way seems to indicate that it might have had a special meaning or significance. But again, it is not named. Like many of the other times when Jesus is described as praying, he has evidently gone apart from these his closest friends, he is at least some distance from them; he is not praying with them or over them. They may be the subject of his prayers, but if that is the case, they are unaware of it. From this introduction to our passage, it seems that the certain place where he is praying is apart from them enough so that although they see him and observe him, know what he is doing and when he finishes, they are not participating in the activity. Perhaps it is this frequency which demonstrates the importance of prayer in Jesus' life. Or perhaps it is the knowledge that John had taught his disciples a particular prayer while Jesus went apart to pray which left them uncertain about what to say. Or perhaps the disciples just felt unsure about how to approach God themselves. The text doesn't tell us what causes this disciple make this request: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." But Luke records that one disciple had made the request on behalf of the others---has asked for instructions for us. And what is recorded is Luke's version of what is known as the Lord's Prayer. But really, given the context in which it was given, probably should have been called the Disciple's Prayer. And Jesus responds by giving them a few instructions, some similar to those found in Matthew, but fewer and not quite the same. This passage of thirteen verses contains five things to pray, a parable on prayer and then several sayings about prayer. Jesus tells them, "When you pray, say Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." Jesus instructs his disciples to approach God using a surprising address—Abba. The translation commonly used is Father and is technically correct, but Jesus was not indicating gender as much as relationship. Abba is better translated as Papa or Daddy. When Jesus starts the prayer with Abba he means we are to come to God in prayer as though we have an intimate, personal relationship with the Creator of the Universe. Next, as in Matthew comes the phrase hallowed be your name. To be hallowed is to be revered, to be held in reverence. When we begin our prayer in this manner we are asking that in this personal relationship we have with our Lord, that our beliefs, our behaviors, and all those things we might say and do which might reflect on God's name be worthy of God's goodness. This prayer

begins by asking that only good be done in the name of God. This thought continues in the expressed wish for God's reign or kingdom to come. Unlike Matthew no comparison between earth and heaven is given. God's kingdom is simply desired to come—to be present. The next instruction is a request to be given daily bread. In other words, provision for what is needed for each day as it comes. This is followed by a different phrasing about forgiveness: forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. Jesus has previously taught them about forgiving before seeking forgiveness—so this phrase is different from what we normally find in the prayer we use which uses a conditional phrase—forgive us as we forgive. The last line Jesus gave them: And do not bring us to the time of trial is always easy to be misunderstood. We should not think that God puts temptation in our paths just to tempt or test us. Temptation and trials come along with being a human being who lives in a broken world. This part of the prayer addresses our needs to face the future which will come. It is a request to be sustained through our relationship with God, though that relationship may be made stronger and not destroyed by whatever trials which life brings. That is a walk through the brief set of instructions which Jesus gave in response to the request: Lord, Teach us to pray. We don't know if it was similar to what John had taught his disciples. But we know that these were things Jesus considered his disciples needed to use to approach God—the understanding that it was to be an intimate relationship, that in that relationship they should bring reverence to God's name, make request for their needs, seek forgiveness after they had forgiven others and seek to be strengthened to face life through their prayer relationship. After the prayer instructions, Jesus tells a parable about someone going to a friend's home late at night, after midnight asking for three loaves of bread because of the arrival of a guest at his home. This request is refused, but the final line is "I tell you even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence, he will get up and give him whatever he needs." This is often mis-interpreted as an indication that if you are persistent, then God will give you your request. However, if you pay attention, there are two things of importance here which have been overlooked. First, the request is for something not needed. The request is for three loaves of bread at midnight—no meal is needed to be offered for an arriving friend at midnight; in that period and culture, a midnight arrival would have been unlikely. Secondly, the request was only made once. Persistence wasn't involved. The instructions in the prayer Jesus gave them was to ask for needs, not desires. We do have a problem with confusing those things. Next comes one of the more familiar sayings drawn from this text about prayer. Jesus continues in verse 9: "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given 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." Again, we have often interpreted this as a call to persistence, making it into a litany of "ask and keep asking" and so forth. It might be more helpful to read these instructions of Jesus as an invitation to trust. To ask, yes. Then to look around...to search...to knock...confident that you will receive...but with an awareness that perhaps your request was not what you needed, perhaps your request has an answer that you were not expecting, perhaps the timing is not right, perhaps a lot of things because the prayer you made was not one that hollowed God's name, perhaps it was not for a need, but a want. Because prayer is such a familiar practice in worship and in the public arena today, it might come as a surprise

that in the time of Jesus it was not. So it would not have been unusual for the disciples to be unsure about how to pray. To me, it was surprising that folks would approach me with this same sort of issue because it was just something that you do....and it took awhile for me to understand why my response was not helpful. Although I get the question less these days, I have worked on making a better explanation of what prayer is or should be...how one goes about it. Prayer is a conversation with God. That is why Jesus taught us to enter it with the words Abba...Conversations happen with one whom we are in relationship. And conversations mean that while we voice things...like our needs...our fears and concerns...our praise and thanks...we also spend some quiet time...some time in silence...listening for that still small voice which will give us guidance...bring us hope...give us strength...encompass us with love, grace and peace. That is prayer...and that is a gift available to each of us as part of the daily bread we are given. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.