

January 27, 2002

“WHAT TO SAY...WHEN WE PRAY...”

“He was praying in a certain place, and when he had ceased, one of his disciples said to Him ‘Lord, teach us to pray...’” Luke 11:01

Last Spring, when I asked members and friends of the Chapel to suggest Sermons they would like to hear, I received such a tremendous response that I could not come near to handling all of them. I plan to include a few of the neglected ones during this Winter-Spring. One which I especially regret overlooking was a request by my friend Bill Jehlen, a World War II Veteran and a former Prisoner of War in Stalag 17. He asked me to preach in the words of our sermon title today, a sermon on prayer. Specifically he wrote, “How can we make our prayers more effective? I even suggest a title for you Dr. Cromie: What To Say When We Pray.” This sermon is my answer.

As a matter of fact almost the exact question and title are mentioned in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. A goodly part of the Sermon on the Mount includes instruction on prayer, especially with the Lord’s Prayer. “When you pray,” it reads, “pray like this....” In the Gospel of Luke, where the Lord’s Prayer appears in a shorter version, the disciples went up to Jesus, when he was finished praying, and said “Lord, teach us to pray.” Now think of all the other things they might have asked him to teach them. To bring it home, assume you could ask the Lord to teach you anything at all, what would you choose?

I guess the answers would be as far reaching and different as are the people in these pews. What would you ask Jesus to teach you? One answer might be how we could find peace in the world, or more personally, how to find peace in your home, or how to find peace within your own soul and psyche.

To be a bit frivolous, I am afraid that with some of us, the number one question would be: “What is going to happen to the stock market?” Or, “How can I recover my losses? Tell me where to invest my money.” The number one need often has to do with things personal and financial. I never heard as much complaining in all of 2001 about spiritual or moral matters as I heard about the stock market as it kept going lower and lower. I do not mean to belittle the fears of recession. But, I say this knowing that Jesus never had a dime? He never had a shekel, except a borrowed one. He also taught that if you have one suit of clothes, or one dress and one pair of sandals, that is enough. So, if you are honest with yourself and say: “My number one question is: ‘What shall I do with my money?’”, at least you should not expect Jesus to applaud.

Some others might ask, (this is more serious), “How can I find success in this world? How can I manage to get where I want to go, to find a good job, or at least one which

gives some meaning to my life, so that I can feel I am affirmed and useful?" Many people are in need of that.

Others would ask for a healing. In my opinion we have hardly touched the surface of successful prayers for healing. If you have problems of health, then you would surely ask: "Where can I go? Please, Lord.... Please, anyone.... Where can I go to be healed?" Good question.

Others would ask (Are you with me?): "How can I resurrect the joy of my home and family?" You can make it everywhere else, but if things go sour at home, if the relationship of a marriage begins to falter, or that of father-son, husband-wife, brother-sister... it really does not matter what else goes well, it hurts all over.

Others would ask: "How can I help my son or daughter?" Should I give more to them? Or should I say: 'It's time for you to take over.' Should I wait a little longer, and give him/her another loan? You know what I mean. When to hold on, and when to let go is one of the most difficult aspects of parenthood. I feel for the parents of Taliban supporter John Walker. Perhaps they were not perfect parents, but he was far from a perfect son.

Others are lonely. They would ask the Lord how and where to find a boyfriend or a girlfriend or just any friend. "How can I find someone who will appreciate me, and whom I can appreciate, one who will accept me for what I am, as I could accept them?" I want to tell you, Church, in this fast-moving, fun-loving, high-powered, transient, maritime area, it is not an easy place to find a true friend. Everybody is preoccupied...with pleasures, with water, with sun, with fun, with their own lives. And oh my goodness, we miss a lot!

Now that is a trifle heavy, I know. Sorry if I depressed or disappointed you, let me lighten it up a little bit. When I asked one fellow, he told me that all he really wants to know is how to putt. He said: "I have a five handicap from tee to green; but I am 19 or so after I get there." You know what I mean.

A little middle-aged woman asked me years ago: "How can I find some meaning for my life?" It is sad, but I could not help her. I tried, but she took her own life two years later. Are you with me? If you had the one person to go to one who knew it all... what would you ask?

You have guessed by now that I am going to the Bible, in particular to Luke 11, the Scripture behind our sermon topic today. The twelve disciples, close friends and followers of Jesus had to answer the same two questions. "Where will I go to find the help I need; and when I get there, what will I ask?" In one way, it was a lot easier for them really, because He was right there, walking about in Galilee. But don't make it too

easy. He did not have a neon sign over His head saying: “I Am The Messiah”. I do not mean to be disrespectful, but, He dressed like everyone else. He talked like everyone else. The pity of it is, almost all of them missed it. But not these twelve, (eventually eleven). They found the one to talk to.

So, think about the Apostles, and the questions they might have asked Jesus in religious matters. What would you want to ask Him? I think I know what I would ask. I would say: “Lord, teach me how to do some of those miracles! Teach me how to heal people who are sick; and how to cast the demons out of the demoniacs. Teach me to turn the stones into bread, so we could feed the hungry people of the world, just like that....” The little boy inside of me says: “Lord, teach me how to walk on the water.” Wouldn’t that be great, just cruising along on top of Lake Worth! Why, I’d go out on there, just south of our church, and walk upstream and down, calling everyone to come to service. And they would come. You can hardly find a seat these days at the Chapel. But imagine, if I learned to walk on water!

When it came to the disciples, when they found Jesus, do you remember what they asked Him? Now, realize that nowhere else in all the New Testament did they ask Him to teach them anything else specific. That is significant. Nowhere else in all of The Gospels do they say: “Lord, teach us how to do this”, or “teach us how to do that.”

It says this: as He finished praying at a certain place, one of the disciples came up to Him and said: “Lord, teach us to pray.” (It does not say which disciple.)

That might strike you as rather tame. I mean, what is so big and important about your putting your hands together, bowing your head and saying : “Lord, do this for me”, or “Lord, do that”. I have a deep underlying feeling that many of the Christian People I know do not really feel deep down that prayer changes things. Too many people, who love the name of Jesus, deep down do not seem to believe that prayer has its unique power. Most people admit it can change your attitude. A theologian told me: “Prayers never have been known to hurt anybody.” But, I ask you, “Do you believe in your heart that prayer changes anything?” Probably yes, right?.... Maybe.... Who knows?

I wonder why they asked Him about prayer, and not about one of the miracles. I think I know: If you followed the life of Jesus, as they did, and watched him day by day, you would soon realize that at every significant moment, at times of great decision, at times of dire worry, as in the garden of Gethsemane, at times when his friends were sick or dying, as with Lazarus, He turned to God in prayer. Jesus often went away to a lonely place to talk to himself, to pray to God. And it would not have taken them very long to figure out that that was the source of His power. He had something they didn’t. He never claimed to be a miracle worker, as some did. He never claimed to change anything on His own. Give God the glory as He works through Jesus Christ.

Years and years ago I was pastor to a marvelous woman, a retired missionary from China, Mary Karcher. She was a gem. I have never known anyone who could pray as she did. All of Heaven, the Angels and Archangels included, stopped in their tracks when Mary prayed. I could feel God Himself listening. I always asked her to pray for me. She would say "I will." I would say "No Mary, I mean now. Just ask God to bless me. He knows what I need." And she would. I also asked her to teach me to pray. She just smiled. "You'll learn someday."

Every once in a while after church or on the street or in some store, someone recognizing me will stop me and ask me to pray for them. "Say a little blessing for my children." "Pray for me." I am always pleased and flattered, and I always oblige. It happened a couple of months ago at the door of the Chapel. It happened at the grocery store too, not long ago.

The one thing the disciples wanted to learn was: "Lord, teach us to pray." His answer (Are you listening?) was The Lord's Prayer. We say it every Sunday morning in most every church throughout the land. I say it many, many times alone. It is divided into two parts. It begins, as the Ten Commandments do, with our relationship to God. "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."

The word that Jesus used for Father is touching. There is another word in Greek for "Father". This one means more like "Daddy"...our Daddy. It is difficult to bear sometimes, when, for example, I think about my parents.... When I think about the three wonderful daughters God has given us. I am so busy now, and they are so busy with their work and with the grandchildren. I cherish every time we get a chance to talk. When Jesus addressed himself to God as Father, I think about my parents.

Often I asked them for things. But if I could bring them back for five minutes, I would not ask for anything. I would just talk to them. I think that is what Jesus is teaching in the first part of the Lord's Prayer. We need to talk to God. He loves us. What would you think of a child who loved his/her parents, and never talked to them? That first part of "Our Father" means that God wants us to communicate. After all, we are His children.

But, at a far deeper level: when we are taught to begin our prayers with the phrase "Our Father", we are asserting that we all, every man, woman, child, of every race, religion, and nationality, we all are equally, and together, the children of the Heavenly Father. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that the phrase "Our Father" summarized his entire religious belief. Brothers and sisters have differences to be sure, but there is one Father and one Family of God. We all belong together.

Yesterday, I was alone in the parking lot, coming into the Chapel to put the finishing touches on the service for this morning. As frequently happens, there was a small group of people, seven or eight, looking at our magnificent Kapok Tree at the foot of our west Olivia Kiebach Gardens. Seeing me trying to sneak unnoticed into the Chapel, they ran up and asked if they could see the inside and if they could ask me about the tree, the Sea Gull Cottage, and the Chapel. Of course I said yes. (Just what I wanted to do.)

I asked what they were doing here (I still don't know their names), "Well, it's Mom's 80th birthday today," one of them said, "and we are her four children. We decided to get together in Royal Palm Beach to celebrate." "How nice," I said. The one daughter added, "Three of us haven't seen each other or spoken to each other for 25 years." I said, "Are you speaking now?" She said, "Sure." I said "What happened, did you have a big fight." She said, "Yes!" I said, "What was it about? Was it worth wasting 25 years as a family with your Mother and Dad (now gone)?" She said "None of us can remember what the fight was really all about..."

Oh dear. "Our Father" settles that for good. "I, me, my" never appears in the ideal prayer. It is always "we, our, us." God is not an exclusive possession of mine. Much as I personally love him, I don't own Him. He belongs to everyone.

To go a little deeper, perhaps you read this past week that aging ailing Pope John Paul II called an ecumenical meeting of religious leaders of all faiths. It convened in the lovely Italian town of Assisi, the one time home of St. Francis of Assisi, "The singular apostle of peace." In the Thirteenth Century Basilica, leaders from Jewish, Christian, Muslim, several African religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, even the obscure Zoroastrianism. (I will buy anyone an ice cream cone at Sprinkles after the service, who can tell me two things that Zoroastrians believe.) Muslim leaders came from Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt, etc., etc.

They prayed together, for peace in the world. Muslim clergy knelt on their rugs facing Mecca. Jewish Rabbis stood, facing Jerusalem. Catholic clergy knelt on kneelers in the Chapel. Zoroastrians lighted a bon fire outside the Basilica. Bartholomew I, Patriarch of Constantinople said afterwards that "A common interest is shared by all of us: to discover the real essence of religion, beyond prejudice and national and ethnic difference." Do you think it will make any difference that they prayed for peace? Thy will be done dear God. I hope so.

But back to the Lord's Prayer, Jesus said: When you pray, say:

1. One, acknowledge Our Father, the one Creator God who is in heaven. Every prayer, public or private, should begin with the acknowledgment that God is universal and high and lifted up. He is our father in all senses of the word.
2. Second say, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done." We are usually concerned about our will, my will, what I want. Always Jesus said, "Thy will be done," the

- will of the Heavenly Father. We are free to ask God to give us what we think we need and want. But when we finish with our list, we must surrender it all to God. Jesus prayed in the Garden “Please take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done.”
3. Thirdly: It is permissible to ask for daily bread. Not for a fortune for the rest of time; but Heavenly father, give us what we need for today; bread and life and love for all of us, and for all thy children everywhere.
 4. “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” In Luke’s shorter version of the Lord’s Prayer, the word for debts is changed to forgive us “our sins.” (I don’t know why Luke changed it.) Some churches have adopted that use for corporate worship. In either case, you owe a debt to those you have harmed or sinned against. That debt must be paid before you can expect the Lord to forgive you.
 5. Fifth and last, “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” Now you know as well as I do that it is not God, but we ourselves who lead us into temptation. God never leads us there. It says that directly in the Book of James. God possibly puts us “*to the test*” sometimes, as seen in the Book of Job to prove our faithfulness. But the prayer is to ask God mainly to protect us from the troubles we make for ourselves.

So to answer the question “What to say...When we pray.” I recommend writing down the following form of prayer and filling in the blanks each day.

1. First, make sure your prayer praises and glorifies the Heavenly Father. “My ways are not your ways says the Lord; neither are my thoughts your thoughts.” He is not your friendly buddy down at the corner, He is high and lifted up.
2. Second, make sure your prayers and requests always end, “Nevertheless, not my will, but Thine be done.” Ask as you will. All things are permissible to ask. Be honest. The Prayer of Jabez teaches us that. But always end your prayer, “Thy will be done!”
3. Third, make sure your prayer asks God to provide for you. But add all your household, all of your friends, and all the children of the world!
4. Fourth: Ask for God’s forgiveness for all that you have done wrong, and provided you have forgiven those you have sinned against, and to whom you owe something, in Christ he will forgive and forget the sins you have committed. You owe a debt to anyone you have wronged. Repay it first; then ask God to forgive you. He will.
5. Fifth, last: Ask God to guide you and yours into His Will, to avoid the temptations of this mortal life and to rise above evil.

My first ministerial boss Dr. Howard Scharfe, forty years ago, loved to tell the story of the old farmer in a little country congregation who was known for his faith and confidence. Many times he was observed standing before the altar of the little village

church. The parish pastor asked him one day what he said to God while he was standing there praying, and how he found his strength? He replied, “Oh, I don’t ask for anything, I just stand there and look at him and he looks back at me, and before long my prayers are answered.” For now and forever more. Amen.

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