

I'm struck by the disciples' request in this morning's Gospel. "Teach us to pray," they say. There is a lot in those four words.

Why did they make this request? What kind of response were they hoping for?

After all, these were devout Jewish men ... They had grown up entrenched in the Jewish faith and life. They knew the Torah inside and out. They told the stories of what we call the Old Testament and Apocrypha in the synagogues, around campfires, at the dinner table. They knew all about how to pray not only with their lips but in their lives: their hairstyles, their garments, their bathing rituals, the food they ate, greetings they shared in the street, their general comportment ... all were understood to be forms of prayer.

Allow me to back up a moment. It's probably helpful to know that various groups of students (disciples) were known by the stylistic nuances of their rabbi's (teacher's) prayers. Which isn't too different than today with respect to denominational differences in prayer styles: to paint in extremely broad strokes and in overly simplistic terms, we know our Pentecostal brothers and sisters by their hands in the air and their focus on the power of God's Holy Spirit. Our Evangelical friends emphasize redemption from sin by the blood of the Lamb, and the centrality of one's personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. We can recognize our Orthodox siblings in Christ by their use of iconography. Our Roman Catholic friends often carry rosaries and say the Hail Mary.

As for us, well ... college was where I first heard the joke that for most Christians, the Bible is the Good Book; but Episcopalians, the Book of Common Prayer is the Great Book. (I'll leave it to you to decide if there's any truth in that.)

At any rate, various groups of faithful Jews were known by the distinct styles of prayer taught by their particular rabbis. And it is clear in the disciples' request that they are eager to learn Jesus' distinct way of praying ~ likely because they recognized in him an intimacy and transformative presence that was shaped by his relationship with God. They ask **how** to pray, implying they are seeking to know the process by which Jesus formulates and articulates his interaction with God.

The disciples seem to hope that they will achieve the same peace, strength and wisdom that their teacher embodies.

Anatole France, a French poet who died some hundred years or so ago, wrote, “You learn to speak by speaking. Study by studying... Work by working. In the same way, you learn to love by loving.”¹ As Luke writes, according to Jesus, you learn to pray by praying.

There is a lot to say about what Jesus then prays, why he prays it, how he prays it, but I will point out just a few highlights.

The first is the communal word ‘our.’ Not ‘my,’ but *our*. It is an indicator of community, of a common longing, and a request made on behalf of the many. Jesus’ example, which is now affectionately called the Lord’s Prayer, comes on the heels of his instructions earlier in Luke’s Gospel regarding (1) listening to the Word of God, and (2) doing the Word of God. If one is fed by internalizing God’s Word, and attempts to incarnate God’s Word through their actions, then one’s petitions of God will be for the benefit of the community, not only (or even primarily) for oneself.

Sidenote: there are other places where Jesus models prayer for oneself (most notably in the Garden of Gethsemane when he asks God to “take this cup from me”²), so prayer for oneself is not bad or wrong, it simply is not the focus of the lesson for the disciples on this particular day.

So one fundamental characteristic of the prayer life for the disciples of Jesus is communal prayer, or “common prayer,” the collective intention within corporate worship for the broader benefit of all God’s children.

Notice how Jesus doesn’t indicate in any way that our prayers will be answered in the way or timeframe that we request. There is no promise that our requests will be granted. We won’t necessarily be healed from our disease, our anxiety over a particular situation may not be relieved, the fractured relationship we grieve may never be fully restored. Notice in Abraham’s prayer from Genesis, Abraham bargains with God over and over again for the benefit of a community who has rejected God. What we learn if we keep reading in the next chapter of Genesis, Sodom is destroyed anyway. It sounds harsh, but bad things will still happen.

¹ Anatole France

² Luke 22:42

Which is to say that God is clearly affected by Abraham's prayer, but God isn't necessarily changed by it.

The second point Jesus makes is that we should pray *immediately*. He doesn't say, 'well, dinnertime is in a few hours. We'll talk about it after saying grace.' No, he prays right then. Because every moment, every context is a good time to pray.

Third, we are to pray with *intimacy*. Putting to words the longings of our hearts, the desires that we hold most dear. We don't need to dress up our prayers in fancy language, or even with proper grammar. But say what we long for, what we need, what we want. We are to be real in our relationship with God, and not feel as though we need to hold back. It's okay to say whatever we feel, whatever is on our mind. Not that we'll always receive the specifics of what we want it, or how we want it.

Which brings me to my last point: what does Jesus promise God *will* do as the result of our prayer? Check out our Gospel's last verse: 'the heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit.'

We are promised the gift of the Holy Spirit. It may not fit our idea of what we want or need, but by golly, the gift of the Holy Spirit is pretty doggone fantastic. And ultimately, the gift of the Holy Spirit exactly what we need. Every time.

Little did the disciples know that when they requested that Jesus teach them to pray that they as a community of faithful followers would be directed to seek and be responsive to the movement of the Holy Spirit. The lesson they were taught is that Jesus calls us to be attuned to the needs of the entire community before oneself, uttered within an intimate relationship with God, and open to the Spirit's guidance and support. As we read the rest of Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts, **this** is how the disciples came to be known as they dispersed and preached and taught and healed in the communities to which they went. Praying as Jesus prayed is that simple. And that hard.

An obvious example of this lesson is a bit like our elephant in the living room. As most of us know by now, our rector, Father Furman, has discerned a call to serve as rector of another parish. And while we are no doubt excited for him, we are also embarking on a journey of both thanksgiving for our shared ministry with him as well as a journey of grief as we say goodbye and God's speed. Both aspects of that transition are important to prayerfully acknowledge before we begin the process of discerning who our next leader of St. Peter's will be. We will be praying our

lament as Father Furman takes his leave and begins his next chapter of ministry, and in time, we will open ourselves up in our common prayer that God moves in the heart of our next leader to faithfully consider coming to be among us. We will work to articulate our needs, our struggles and our gifts as a parish community, and we will give room for the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us in this process.

I mentioned what Anatole France said: ‘You learn to speak by speaking. Study by studying. Work by working... In the same way, you learn to love by loving.’ I might add that we learn to trust by trusting, we learn to follow by following, and we learn to pray by praying.

So let us pray: Our Father, teach us to speak what needs to be said; teach us to study those things we need to learn; teach us to work so that we may build your Kingdom; and teach us to love so that others may **also** recognize you and long to know and embody your love. But first, Lord, teach us to pray ~ that we may hear your voice above the noise of our lives, that we may recognize your call to engage with a community that is bigger than ourselves, and trust you to lead us where you desire us to follow. Amen.