

## *Lord, Teach Us to Pray*

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON LUKE 11:1-13

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*He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray . . . ." (Luke 11:1)*

"So! I have heard you  
calling out, but have you ever  
gotten any response?"

The man had no answer to that.  
He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.<sup>1</sup>

**T**HAT WAS ONE PERSON'S EXPERIENCE OF PRAYER, as Sufi poet Rumi described it, and maybe it has been your experience, too. It certainly has been mine. My guess is that all of us have struggled at least once with the experience of unanswered prayer. When prayer goes unanswered long enough, any of us might quit praying and fall into a confused sleep.

That might be one of the reasons why that disciple came to Jesus and said, "Lord, teach us to pray." They didn't ask Jesus to teach them to pray after he had delivered a lecture or led a seminar or guided a weekend retreat on prayer. Nor did the request come, I need to remember, after he delivered a sermon on prayer. The request, "Teach us to pray," came after they had seen him praying, after they observed the effects of prayer in his life. They wanted the life he had, and they knew prayer was the way to it.

I, too, want the life he had, and I have long known that learning to pray is key to it. For a year I studied prayer and meditation in seminary. I experienced a sixteen-day immersion in a Jungian approach to prayer and scripture with the Guild for Psychological Studies. I've studied and led retreats on prayer using the Myers-Briggs personality type indicator. I've read broadly and used models of prayer in the Western, Roman, Orthodox, and desert monastic traditions of the church. I've even followed Thomas Merton east (metaphorically) and approached prayer from a Zen perspective.

Along the way I've learned – as you will, too, if you haven't already – that learning how to pray is not the same as praying. Asking someone, even Jesus, to teach us to pray

is a good start. After all, Jesus answered his disciples' request by giving them good words and a good model for effective prayer. But at some point we've got to turn from the teacher and the instruction and actually start praying, no matter how effective or ineffective at it we may feel. So this sermon is not an attempt to teach you to pray; it's an invitation to perhaps think of prayer differently and then to try it on your own.

Learning the words or technique of prayer is the place to begin, but it doesn't matter what we know about prayer if we don't pray. And in the end we may recognize that praying is not what *we* do at all; it's something *God* does. When we don't know how to pray, Saint Paul wrote, it doesn't matter. That's when God does our praying in us and for us, "with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26).

We make a good start to prayer by learning the words of a prayer – the Lord's Prayer is a good place to begin – or by using the Psalms or a prayer book. Sooner or later I think you'll find the particular words or technique don't matter very much. What matters is how we give attention to what God is doing in the stirrings of the heart. What matters is not what we say to God but how we listen with "the ear of our heart"<sup>2</sup> to what God says to us, how we listen to the cycles of life and creation in each day and night as they speak to us without words (Ps. 19:1-4).

Prayer is what we do to let God in on God's terms, to lower our screens and filters, suspend our judgment, and allow ourselves to resonate with the music of the spheres. The essence of prayer, Rabbi Rami Shapiro observed, is to live in the world with full attention, to be truly, completely present and available to this moment and not be worried and distracted by what happened yesterday or might happen tomorrow (Matt. 6:25-34). It is to study the curriculum of our own lives as much as we study the morning paper or the evening news broadcast.

Thomas Long, professor of homiletics at Princeton, said it this way: "Prayer is not a message scribbled on a note, jammed into a bottle and tossed into the sea in hopes that it will wash up someday on God's shore. Prayer is communion with God. We speak to God, but God touches, embraces, shapes and changes us. [*Whatever* we pray for], our prayer is answered because in the act of praying we receive the gift we really seek – intimacy with God."

So the best place to start is here, and the best time is now. Indeed, the only start we will ever make is here and now. In the silence woven into our spoken prayers, in the silence surrounding our scripture readings, in the pauses between what we do, listen to what God says, attend to what God does. Give attention to the responses to life God is making within you in this moment and in every moment of every day. Listen with the ear of your heart, and be in prayer.

NOTES: ▪ 1. Jalal al-Din Rumi, "Love Dogs," *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 155. ▪ 2. Prologue, *The Rule of Benedict*.