

Being bold in prayer

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, July 24, 2016.

...one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." Luke 11:1

When one of his disciples asks Jesus to teach them to pray, he teaches them a prayer of his own. Most of us don't remember when we learned to pray the Lord's Prayer. It's like the little child who once asked, "Was I born knowing the Lord's Prayer?" For most of us it has just always been there.

The Irish theologian John Dominic Crossan has written that the Lord's Prayer is not only Christianity's greatest prayer, but also its strangest. It is prayed by all Christians, yet it never mentions Christ. It is prayed in all churches, yet it never mentions church. It is prayed on Sundays, yet it never mentions Sunday. It is prayed by fundamentalist Christians, but never mentions the inspired inerrancy of the Bible. It is prayed by Pentecostal and evangelical Christians, but it never mentions evangelism.

It is prayed by Protestants and Catholics, yet it never mentions doctrines, priests, bishops or pope.

Of prime importance in mature Christianity is knowing how and what to pray. The many versions of the Lord's Prayer include the New Revised Standard Version that reads: 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. You might think that the one we have said all our lives is from the King James Version of the Bible of 1611, but that reads somewhat differently: Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins: for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us.

In whatever version, this most widely known prayer in all Christianity addresses the God who creates, redeems and sustains us. This is the God who knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us better than we love ourselves.

We pray that God's sacred name be revered and honored. Because the name of God is holy, it must never be used casually or even worse in cursing and swearing. To use God's name in vain is a serious offense because it is wrong to ask God to condemn or destroy anyone or anything. This is God's universe and not ours. We are tenants in this place and time that God has given us. Because we are addressing the One who brought us into being and sustains us, we therefore approach God with awe and reverence.

The focus then moves from the nature of God to God's relationship to all humanity. We ask that God's kingdom and realm be realized here on earth as it is in heaven. The realm of heaven, rather than a physical place is a relationship with God that reflects what God intends for us. God's realm exists on its own and we pray that we may attain to its likeness. We pray that we follow God's will so perfectly that heaven and earth will be brought closer together.

We then petition God for our own sustenance as represented in bread. When you receive the bread in the Eucharist today, know that it represents Christ's whole person who provides us with our basic physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

The next petition is the only one that has any conditions. When we alienate ourselves from God and each other through sin, we ask for forgiveness and reconciliation. This is on the condition that if we accept our own forgiveness, we are also willing to forgive others.

In the final petition we ask to be spared in times of trial and temptation. We all have to face testing and temptation. There is no sin in being tempted, only in yielding to it. It is by God's grace that we are guided through testing and temptation.

The object of prayer is not to give orders or try to second-guess God's knowledge and concern. God knows our needs before we ask; yet we still make known our needs and the needs of others. In our age of advanced communications and social media, we are still far from perfecting the fine art of communication. It is like when the power goes off and we can't communicate with the outside world or when we have an angry encounter with someone and aren't on speaking terms. We do harm ourselves by cutting off all communication. When we are angry with God for what we feel is an injustice we have to remember that God is greater than our anger. When we find our faith ebbing, it is important to remain in contact with God during times of doubt and uncertainty. Though we may pull away, God never abandons us.

Jesus emphasizes the importance of asking for what we need when he taught, 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. No matter what the concern, we should not feel that our needs are unimportant or that we are not worthy to ask for help. We can't expect for God to bail us out when we knew better. God encourages us to take the initiative to find solutions. We too easily blame a situation on circumstances when we can create circumstances that will make a situation better.

By engaging in prayer, we stay close to the heart of God and are in a better position to understand our options. Our prayers are not always answered the way we want. The answers are either "yes," "no," or "wait." It is when we are distracted and not listening that we can't hear or understand the answer.

In prayer, be regular, be bold, be simple and be humble. Too often we turn to prayer only when we are desperate and feeling hopeless. When working our way through a dilemma we begin with focusing on a solution.

An ancient Christian proverb in the Latin is: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*- the rule of prayer precedes the rule of belief. When we pray earnestly, we grow in faith. Each of us has a story that is like a book. When that book is bound together with prayer, it is less likely to unravel even when we are pulled in different directions.

So, pray as if your life depends on it...because it does!