

Like a Child

Have you ever had the privilege of getting to listen to a child praying? If you're a parent or grandparent, you probably have. But just in case it's been a while since you've heard children's prayers, I brought a few this morning to share with you.

“Dear God, thank you for the baby brother. But what I *prayed* for was a puppy.”

“Dear God, it must be really hard to love *all* the people in the world, especially my sister. I don't know how you do it.”

“Dear God, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I'm having a real good time just like I am!”

“Dear God, is it true my dad won't get into heaven if he uses his *golf words* in the house?”

“Dear God, my grandpa says you were around when *he* was a little boy. How far back do you go?”

“Dear God, did you *mean* for giraffes to look like that, or was it an accident?”

“Dear God, maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they each had their own rooms. It works out OK with me and *my* brother.”

“Dear God, I didn’t think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset you made last night. That was really cool.”

“Dear God, please take care of my daddy, mommy, sister, brother, my doggy, and me. Oh. Please take care of *yourself*, God. If anything happens to you, we’re gonna be in a big mess.”

“Dear God, I say your prayer every night: ‘Lead us not into temptation and deliver us some e-mail.’ But I never get any e-mail from you. Do you have my right address?”

The prayers of children bring smiles to our faces. But kids have a special way of praying that we grown-ups sometimes wish we could emulate. You know, maybe we adults make this business of praying too complicated. We’re afraid we don’t have the right words. And sometimes we aren’t too sure that we’ll *receive* what we pray for. Even if we’ve prayed all our lives, sometimes we feel as though we don’t know how to pray at all. We may feel like the disciple in today’s gospel reading, the one who sees Jesus praying and then asks him how to pray. That’s

when Jesus gives his followers his best-known prayer. The one we know as the Lord's Prayer.

This prayer we hear in Luke's Gospel doesn't sound quite the same as the one we pray together every Sunday, does it? Luke's version is shorter than Matthew's. And it's likely that this prayer we find in Luke is the one that came straight from the lips of Jesus. In response to a disciple's request.

It's important that you and I hear and take note of exactly what this request is. It's not: *Lord, teach us a prayer*. This disciple asks: *Lord, teach us to pray*. It's not only about the *words* of this prayer, foundational and beloved though they are. In today's reading, Jesus does indeed teach us a prayer—a model for *all* our prayers.

But more than that. Jesus himself teaches us a new *way* of praying. Jesus teaches that when we pray, we are to be childlike. That's what I'd like to consider with you during this time together.

Jesus invites us to pray with the *familiarity* of a child. When he speaks with the One who sent him, he talks as a child talks to a loving parent. He calls this Holy One, *Father*. Signifying family relationship. Suggesting the intimacy of a

close and loving bond. And Jesus invites you and me to begin *our* prayer in just the same way. To approach God in just the same way. As members of God's family.

Speaking of family members. Our son isn't here this morning, so I can talk about him. It'll be our little secret! He's a grown man—a husband and a father. Most people call him Robert or Rob. But he's still Robbie to us. If Robbie could have spoken on the day he was born, his first words would have been: *When do we eat?* As a little boy, he always looked forward to mealtime. He really liked his groceries. When Robbie asked: *What's for dinner?* on a daily basis, it was as though he were actually saying: *Give me this day my daily bread.*

He didn't ask about what was for dinner the *next day*—because he believed that his parents would keep feeding him the day after and the day after that and for all the days to come. When a meal was set before Robbie, he ate with enjoyment. With gusto. He didn't worry that we were going to sneak a snake or a spider onto his plate. And he didn't worry that there might not be enough for tomorrow. It never would have occurred to him to stash food away for another day. He just

wasn't concerned about it. There was no anxiety—because he trusted his mom and dad.

That's how Jesus invites us to pray: with the *trust* of a child. We ask: *Give us bread today*. And we'll pray these same words tomorrow and next week and next month. Because God's providential care has no expiration date. And neither does the loving relationship we share with this God we trust, this God who holds the future. This God who will be in all our tomorrows.

This God on whom you and I depend. Jesus invites us to pray with the *total dependency* of a child. Little kids don't assume an air of independence or a posture of self-sufficiency. In much the same way that little kids implicitly acknowledge their innate helplessness and their parents' far greater power, we begin this prayer with confession of God as the very Source of all power and holiness—the confession that God is in charge. With hopeful expectation, we yearn for the coming of God's reign in its fullness. According to Jesus, we get to enter that kingdom when we receive it the way a little child does.

Even though we have been disobedient. Have you ever watched a child, after misbehaving, go in repentance to a parent?

If she feels secure in that parent's love, she knows she'll be forgiven. Jesus invites us to pray with this same *assurance of forgiveness* that we see in a child. To pray to this One who—as the psalmist sings—pardons sin. This One who—as Paul promises the Colossians—forgives trespasses. For on the cross, the same Lord who teaches us to pray has *erased* the record that stood against us.

When you and I go to God with a repentant heart, we can pray: *Forgive us our sins*, with the conviction that we *will* be forgiven. And *forgiving*.

Through the grace of the One who longs to hear from you, desires to be in communion with you. It doesn't matter if your words lack eloquence or formality. It doesn't matter if your words aren't carefully crafted like a speech. It doesn't matter if your words aren't designed to impress. Jesus invites us to pray with the *naturalness* of a child. There's an honesty, a simplicity, a directness in a child's prayer.

Prayer is conversation. Prayer is listening as well as talking. Prayer is waiting for the Holy One who speaks in and through myriad voices—some not audible to our ears but heard

only in our deepest places. Even when there are no words, we pray.

And we keep on praying. With what Oswald Chambers calls “the splendid audacity [of] a childlike child.” Have you ever noticed how a child will ask over and over again for something he needs? He has no qualms or misgivings about it. He just keeps on asking until his request is granted.

Just like the villager in Jesus’ parable, who welcomes a late-arriving guest but has no bread to offer. So, if you’re that person, you go knocking on your neighbor’s door. Even though it’s the middle of the night. Even though you’re waking up your friend’s whole household. You don’t feel guilty or embarrassed about fulfilling the serious obligations of first-century hospitality—about getting some fresh bread to serve your guest. No! You knock and you keep on knocking until you get what you need. Shamelessly!

Jesus invites you and me to pray with the *shamelessness* of a child. To pray with the boldness—with the confidence—with the persistence of a child. A child who goes to a loving parent, not just once, but again and again. Until prayer becomes not just

a series of petitions, but a way of being in the world. Until prayer fills every time and every space.

Whenever we pray, Jesus encourages us to ask and to continue asking. Jesus teaches all his disciples—the twelve and you and me—to pray unceasingly. To keep on asking. To keep on searching. To keep on knocking.

But what about when you ask and you search and you knock, and you *don't* receive? When the recovery doesn't happen? When healing doesn't come—at least, not in this life? When the one for whose safety you've prayed becomes the victim of an accident or an act of violence? What do you do when your prayers seem to go unanswered and the One to whom you pray seems to be silent?

It's hard. It's hard to refrain from arriving at the mistaken conclusion that, because you didn't receive the answer for which you prayed so fervently, you might not have enough faith. And sometimes—because you and I are human—it's even hard not to be angry with God.

At these times that come sooner or later to each of us, it's easy to forget the gospel truth that Jesus teaches us today. But it's a truth he wants us to hold onto and remember always. It's

this: Like a loving parent, God is the Giver of good gifts. And you have Christ's promise: pray as one of God's deeply cherished children, and you *will* receive a precious gift. A wondrous gift. The gift you need most of all. The very best gift. God's own Spirit.

God's own dear presence to cheer and to guide. To convict and to counsel. To remind and to restore. To strengthen and to sanctify and to bless. To fill all your moments and all your days. To dwell in you and to lead you into life in the circle of God's love that has no end.

All you need to do is ask, beloved child of God.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.