

I doubt that there is any ordained person who has not been asked by someone, sometime, how one should pray. The practice seems so mysterious to us. Sometimes we toss off hurried requests to God for things that would be nice but are not necessary, like a close parking space; sometimes we are in an agony of pain or fear or loss and we yearn for a response. Sometimes it seems that our prayers are answered. And sometimes not – maybe especially not when the stakes are high, our needs very great and we desperately want to hear something.

In the face of what may seem to be unheard prayers, we may well decide that there is something about how we are praying that is not right. We need to be given the key to it all. So perhaps we ask an expert, like our priest, who must surely pray all the time, and do it well. Some people read dozens of books on how to pray better.

Others decide to try new paths. Our friend, Tom, when he was a young adult in his twenties dived into a series of spiritual practices, seeking something better, or perhaps more interesting, than the Methodist Church in which he grew up. He went on a vision quest in the Pennsylvania hills. Then for a while he had a sweat lodge he built in the little stand of trees behind our house – which always interested us when there was smoke and steam rising from it. He flirted with Buddhism for a bit, and finally landed in the Orthodox Church, where he has remained and is now an ordained Deacon, who directs a Hospice.

All these are possible approaches to God, but may be just a tad more complex than is necessary. Jesus' disciples asked him how to pray partly because he was their wise teacher, but mostly because they saw him praying. Luke tells us repeatedly that Jesus prayed – before choosing his twelve disciples, on mountain tops and in the wilderness, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the cross. Surely, then, Jesus is the one to ask about how followers ought to pray.

What we call the Lord's Prayer has been with us ever since it was first given, prayed in the church for over two millennia, a constant part of our liturgy. It is a prayer that is short and direct. Perhaps not quite as short as Anne LaMotte's, "Help me, help me, help me. Thank you, thank you,

thank you.” But it is close. Even people who have left the church will usually remember these words.

I think about all the places I have prayed these words with and for people: at bedsides in the hospital, after a church meeting, or hearing someone’s confession. A few days before Kristie Olmanson’s death I sat by her bed in the hospice. She was completely unresponsive, and it was obvious that the end was near. But I know that the last of our senses to depart with our death is hearing. And so after reading several Psalms, I sat holding her hand and prayed the Lord’s Prayer, slowly and deliberately.

It is our prayer that says all there is to know about our connection to God. The words can become so automatic that we don’t always feel connected when we repeat it. But fortunately, it is the nature of God’s connection to us that we don’t need to feel a certain way for the reality to exist. To want to pray is to have already begun to pray.

And surely this a time in our lives and in the life of our congregation that we need to pray. Some of us are struggling with terrible illness; others are grieving the death of loved ones. There is pain here which we cannot change. But we can be the church connected to God and to each other’s pain in prayer.

Surely this a time in the life of our community and nation when we need to pray. Black men, women and children are shot to death, some by police, some by unknown people driving by. Policemen are killed by those whose profound rage spills over in violence. Fifty people, mostly Latino gay men, are murdered in an Orlando nightclub. When so much feels like chaos and fear we experience ourselves as helpless.

But what we can do is to pray. To have come into this sanctuary this morning is to have already begun to pray. Here we gather up all this longing, grief and need into The Lords Prayer.

These words which Jesus gave us are much more simple and direct than we might imagine are needed. We are often tempted to try to grab God’s attention with add words of adoration, or our humility in asking. We often use the King James words to be sure we get things right.

In stark contrast, The Lord’s Prayer is bare bones, and imperative. We name God as Holy and then ask very directly: ‘bring’, ‘give’, ‘forgive’,

'save', deliver'. We pray these words because they connect us to the One who is already with us. We raise this prayer over and over because Jesus taught that we should never stop seeking the Love that is the profound source of all our prayers.

Frederich Buechner wrote, "Pray to God is what I'm saying. And if the little voice that is inside all of us says, 'But I don't believe,' don't worry too much. Just keep on anyway. Even if God does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for."

When I take my time of prayer in the mornings, I usually read several psalms, meditate for twenty minutes, then pray for those who have died. I always end with the Lord's Prayer, said slowly, out loud, said in the knowledge that in any moment when I utter these words, they are also being said by other people in other languages all around this turning globe. So I want to end this sermon with that prayer. I want to pray it very slowly. I will tell you ahead of time, so that it doesn't throw you off too much, that I usually address God as both Mother and Father. I ask that you just listen and be with each other and me. Let us pray.

Our Mother and Father,  
Who is in heaven  
Your name is holy.  
Let your Kingdom come.  
Let your will be done on earth  
As it is in heaven.  
Give us today the bread we need.  
Forgive our sins  
As we forgive  
Those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial.  
Deliver us from evil.

For the Kingdom,  
The Power,  
And the Glory are yours,  
Now and forever.