

TEACH US TO PRAY

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on July 25, 2010

Crossroads United Church

Psalm 85

Luke 11:1-13

At the most challenging time in my life personally and professionally I knew not what to pray. It was 1997, but I remember much of that journey as though it happened last week. In a span of fifteen days we received the news of life threatening disease in the life of our eldest child, and the prognosis that she could not possibly survive the illness. We were informed as a family that we would have eight to twelve weeks living with the Angel of Death before the Angel would call the name of our beloved daughter and sister. The eyes of the curious were upon me as many wondered if the diagnosis and prognosis would strip me of my faith in God.

I continued to live my life as a mother and minister- tending to my domestic and churchly responsibilities- recognizing that as a mother and a minister I ought to pray, but exactly what to pray was enigmatic and illusive. Should I ask God for a cure when this seemed highly improbable? Should I pray for answers to unanswerable questions like what caused this to happen? Should I simply pray, whether in faith or helplessness, thy will be done? The fishbowl of my life grew larger as congregant, friend, relative and stranger alike watched in curiosity to see how fact and faith might intersect or bisect. It was an experience, as can be said of many of life's challenging moments, that "was the best of times and the worst of times." And that experience for me, as both a parent and a pastor, has placed an indelible mark upon my heart and soul. It stands as the most defining influence on my theology, faith and relationships.

Communication with God ought to be a significant aspect of the faith journey. Indeed, it was significant for the disciples of Jesus who asked their master to teach them to pray. My commentary informs that the request was not an uncommon one as followers of a particular teacher and teaching wanted to have rituals that were

characteristic of their particular community. So the Lord's Prayer-long associated with Christianity- has become the signature prayer that has an historic, spiritual and ritual role in the life of the church.

Luke's account of the prayer is far more succinct than that of Matthew's. In the Lukan account there are two petitions of praise to God and three for those praying in community. In essence the Lord's prayer attests to the sovereignty of God and the sureness of the kingdom of God, and three petitions that express human need: the need for food, the need for forgiveness and an escape from the time of trial. If we render the prayer down to its simplest, when we pray we are to honour God and ask for food, grace and strength. Holy Parent, may your kingdom unfold. Feed us. Forgive us. Save us. That is the prayer that we are to pray in community.

We do not pray for our wants and desires to be heard and acknowledged. This does not necessarily stop us from asking for our will to be done in particular situations that cause us anxiety and pain. And there is no suggestion in the teaching that we will disappoint or be admonished when we sometimes blur the lines and ask for those things that may not be given. Luke teaches that there is to be persistence in one's prayer life. But more importantly, in the commentary about asking, seeking and knocking he is reminding his readers of the expansiveness of God's love. Luke is not comparing God to a friend who opens the door and meets a need, if only to silence the appeals, but rather is reminding the reader that if our friends and families are willing to go to great lengths for us, then how much more will God who desires to give us the kingdom? And as most parents will sacrifice self for the sake of their children, how much more will be the effort of God who surpasses the efforts and intentions of human parents?

I am often asked to pray in the wake of tragic and life altering and life threatening circumstance. And while I am happy to oblige the requests, the same question comes to the fore of my heart and brain when I receive the request. I wonder what to say. Public prayer-be it in the sacred hour of worship or in the intimacy and privacy of hospital room

or living room-is a strange confluence of expectations. I am talking to God but also speaking so that the others in the room can hear what I have to say. It is both an act of intimacy and vulnerability, while at the same time, public and proffered in conviction. Whenever I am asked to pray-be it grace at a public function or in more vulnerable situations I recall a time on my ordinand charge when I had been invited to dinner at the home of parishioners.

I was often asked to say grace and this time I suggested that perhaps the patriarch might say the blessing. Somewhat embarrassed he bowed his head and offered his grace. At the conclusion his rather outspoken and terse wife said, "I didn't hear a word you said." Without raising his head and while scooping mashed potatoes onto his plate he responded, "I wasn't talking to you."

This story illustrates the transecting dynamic of prayer: it is both private and public, and particularly when we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught are we mindful of the private and public aspects of in our life of faith. So when I am asked to pray for one at death's door, or one facing surgery or life altering test and procedure I try to honour the sovereignty of God, who listened to Jesus pray to "take this cup away", and from the cross to cry out in anguish "why have you forsaken me"? I ask for healing power to be infused into the hands of all caring professionals and hope and strength for the heart and soul of the patient. I try to be careful in the choice of my words so as to assert my faith that healing and wholeness still rests within the realm of providence, but stop short of making that request. Colleen Townsend Evans has said, "The right way to pray, then, is any way that allows us to communicate with God."

Prayer occupies a most significant place in my day to day to life-even if I am sometimes ponderous of what exactly I ought to say. During my personal time encamped within the Valley of the Shadow, when we as a family needed to make room in our home and lives for the presence of The Angel of Death, I trusted that God was fully aware of my profoundest fears and greatest concerns. So prayer became an opportunity for me to honour the sovereignty of God even as I integrated the profound

sadness and fear with which I lived. I sought God's blessing in the little things-a day well lived, an opportunity to share time even as the clock of life was ticking down. And I came to see Death as an angel in this instance that would ultimately redeem my loved one from struggle, pain and grave illness. This has been a great source of comfort and healing that continues to equip and enable me personally and professionally.

I do not doubt the sovereignty or the holiness of God even as I have come to cherish a theology that views God as vulnerable as well as omnipotent. I have been spoon fed in my times of greatest hunger, and forgiven when I have been shallow and unforgiving-even as I continue to struggle sometimes to forgive those who have hurt me-, and I have been saved from laying blame on those who were powerless to heal. My life is not perfect and I continue to struggle with being imperfect in a vocation that demands perfection. In all things I want to be reality based and hoped filled.

I have learned that in situations where we dance the dance of intimacy between life and death, hope and despair that I will be careful not to put God to the test. I still believe that miracles are possible within the realm of providence, but would rather see the rainbow than obsess about the pot of gold at its end. I have learned that sometimes blessing comes wrapped in an uncomely wrapping. This has been a great source of blessing for me, especially when I have found myself in situations where I was truly afraid that I would not find the right words to speak, and have been nervous in the wake of soul piercing demands. You may not hear me ask for God to heal, but you will hear me invoke the blessing of God in all things and all situations. As a contemporary believer and disciple I cherish the profound simplicity of the prayer that Jesus taught. It continues to proffer me hope and encouragement in my day.

The request of Jesus' disciples to give them a prayer that would be associated with them and their community continues to be the request that is on the lips of believers. During my time of trial I discovered that I needed to relearn what to pray. While I did not formally ask God to give me a prayer I did meditate on what exactly I ought to pray for the safe guarding of my faith during a most trying and difficult time. My

prayers were not for healing but for wholeness, and they were answered as I began to recognize the face of God in sundry individuals and situations. It was god- awful but not God forsaken.

This is our faith and this is our hope: honour God even when God seems silent. Believe in the kingdom even when you experience moments when the kingdom seems but a dream. Seek sustenance sufficient for your body and soul so that you do not abandon the journey. Be forgiving even when you have been taken for granted and disappointed. Trust that you are never abandoned or alone- even in your most demanding trials. Pray with faith, hope and conviction seasoned with vulnerability, humility and honesty, remembering that the profoundest prayers are often the simplest.

Holy Parent, your kingdom unfold. Feed me. Forgive me. Uphold and save me.
Amen.