

You received a picture as you arrived today that has the different parts of the Lord's Prayer that we use in worship. It's the older version and comes mostly from the longer Matthew version. You're invited to write in the squares the things that come to mind as I talk; maybe rewriting the prayer in your own words.

As Christians, prayer is the air we breathe; it is the oxygen that keeps our faith alive and active. Prayer centers our faith in the One who calls us by name before we are born; the one who calls us beyond ourselves to the deeper truth of what it means to be human, beautifully created in **God's** image. Without prayer, faith becomes self-serving and church becomes yet another human centered organization.

Prayer is in our DNA and yet, I can't tell you how many times people have sheepishly confided in me that they don't really feel competent to pray, especially out loud in a group.

So it is appropriate that we join those first disciples of Jesus asking him, "Lord, teach us to pray." We know Jesus' answer to that request. Most of us know the Lord's Prayer by heart. It's often the first prayer we learn as children and the last words on the lips of the dying.

Jesus says, "pray like this" but the story tells us it's not the words that matter so much as the **one** to whom we are praying.

Jesus in this prayer says some simple things very clearly about God. Jesus believes that:

God hears and invites you into relationship.

God provides; not necessarily what we want but, always what we **need**.

God forgives so we can forgive. "One who will not forgive cannot receive forgiveness; mercy flows through the same channel, whether being given or received. The ability to forgive and to be forgiven is part of the same gift. We stand in need not only of daily nourishment but of continual forgiveness."

God protects but 'protection' may not look the way we expect.

God expects us to be generous and God uses that generosity to answer the prayers of other people.

More than teaching us to pray Jesus is teaching us to **trust** the One to whom we pray.

Anne Lamott says that, "Prayer means that, in some unique way, we believe we're invited into a relationship with someone who hears us when we speak in silence ... Prayer is our sometimes real selves trying to communicate with the Real, with

Truth, with the Light. It is reaching out to be heard, hoping to be found by a light and warmth in the world, instead of darkness and cold.”

To make clear how central the relationship is to prayer, Jesus tells this story of the friend at midnight. He says we should pray brashly, shamelessly, knowing that God will always answer our prayer with abundance.

That’s the way **real** relationship works. We ask for what we need, shamelessly. Like a neighbor who shamelessly asks for help in showing hospitality to a guest, we can go to God without embarrassment and ask for what we need. Like a parent who would never dream of giving a snake or a scorpion to a child. God will always provide what’s best for us.

As much as we’d like a vending machine God or an Amazon God; we choose the answer to prayer that we want, put it in our ‘shopping cart’ and Amazon delivers, next day if you pay for Prime! that’s not God. Prayer is not a means to an end. It’s entering into relationship with the source of life. Prayer in relationship gives us what we truly *need* – God’s Spirit living in us, transforming us more and more into the image of God; more and more the human being God created us to be.

But, there’s still one more part of this story that when taken out of context seems to twist our understanding of God and prayer until it’s a mess. That’s the ask, seek, knock part. “Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ Everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. To everyone who knocks, the door is opened.”

Those verses have been twisted to sound as if Jesus is guaranteeing that we’ll get whatever we pray for. And if asking doesn’t get us what we want, it sounds as if he’s saying we should just **try harder**: seek! And if that doesn’t work don’t stop - **keep on** knocking. That makes it sound as if God just wants us to beg, and if we beg enough, then maybe God will relent.

That’s not how God works. Marriages don’t fall apart because people didn’t pray hard enough. Children don’t die of leukemia or overdose because people’s prayers weren’t long enough or they didn’t repeat it often enough.

That’s the **opposite** of what Jesus is saying. Jesus wants us to know that the God to whom we’re praying is always there ahead of our prayers, eager to give us what we **need**. That doesn’t mean there is not pain or sadness in our lives. But, through whatever life gives us, bringing our real need shamelessly before God, means God

pours the holy Spirit into our lives bringing healing and hope and possibilities that were not there before.

But I also think Jesus is saying that those actions are to be taken **not only** in prayer but also in our lives. We are to **ask** God for everything, brashly, shamelessly because God is our loving parent who knows us better than we know ourselves. **And** Jesus says we are to go **beyond** asking to physically seeking the answer to our prayer and beyond that to knocking on the door which means getting off of our knees and putting legs on our prayers. It means **acting** on our prayers.

If those three verbs: asking, seeking, knocking were just an escalation of prayer; first you ask; then you ask harder by seeking; then ask really hard and that's knocking; if that's what Jesus **meant** he could have used words that have that sense of intensified prayer with words. He could have said: ask, beg, entice or ask, plead, persuade. Jesus had a good vocabulary. We can trust that he said what he meant. But the words he uses are Aiteo which means to ask, to petition for something; then 'zeteo' which means to strive after something; and lastly, 'krouo' which means to rap hard on a door with your knuckles. These are **physical** acts not spoken words.

Maybe Jesus is inviting us to **become** our prayer. Pope Francis gave us an example. He said: "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That's how prayer works."

Jesus teaches us to freely pour out our heart's longing and need to our Father in heaven who loves us like the best of parents who give us not everything we want (like Santa fulfilling our every desire on our Christmas list.) This perfect parent gives us what we **need** for life, eternal and abundant: the Holy Spirit who will lead us and shape us into all truth and righteousness so that our lives **become** our prayer.

God uses our prayers. They are important. They change the world. They change us. They make a difference in ways we don't understand. **AND** we act on our prayers with humility because that is what God has empowered us to do. Jesus showed us what life looks like lived in relationship with God and with each other; a life saturated in prayer that led to feeding the hungry, healing the diseased, and raising the dead.

Take a look at the picture of the Lord's Prayer. Pray with it this week. Add to it, change it. Especially, I invite you to write beside the squares the ways you **act** on the prayer to make your **life** the prayer. Write down the ways you forgive and you are forgiven. Write down the ways you make sure that everyone receives daily bread. Write down what **you have done** to keep yourself and others from being tempted. Add those to the prayers you pour out to God and watch for how God is using you to answer the prayers of others.

Please, bring them back and we'll display them so that we can learn from each other.