

Camille Cook Murray
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Washington, D.C.

July 28th, 2019
Luke 11:1-13
Egg or Scorpion

Mary Oliver, one of my favorite poets, after a particularly difficult year in her life wrote, “I have not forgotten the Way, but, a little the way to the Way.” I think she meant she had forgotten the path that leads into the Christian life and into the experience of being close to God. Sometimes the path to the Way grows dim. We know the Way but we forget the way to the Way. Maybe it has happened to you?

When a disciple asked Jesus how to pray, I think he wanted to know the way to the Way. The disciples knew Jesus was not always going to be with them and so they wanted to know how they were going to stay connected to the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. I get this question, about how to pray, from church members, particularly in the middle of difficult seasons or experiences? How do I pray? How do I find my way back to the Way?

Prayer is one of the essential components of the Christian experience and our connection with God. Yet somehow the call to prayer can make articulate, well-educated, grown-ups stutter, sweat, and stare at their shoelaces. I think we are burdened by centuries of floral liturgical language, which makes our own words feel inadequate. We think there is some rubric, some technique, some methodology, which if properly deployed will help lift our prayers into the divine realms. And without the right verbiage and posture then our prayers will land like lead balloons on the pavements of earth rather than elevating gracefully into heaven as we hope.

But that kind of verbal perfection is not required; that is why Jesus’ teaching on how to pray is wonderfully refreshing. He teaches the disciples how to pray, giving them the right words but more importantly the right posture. Jesus said to them, “When you pray, say: ‘Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.’” This prayer starts with the glorification of God: it acknowledges that God is divine, and sovereign, and transcendent. ‘Our Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.’ In the glorification there is a personal and relational sense to God. God is *our* father. God is one we can know and name. And God’s divine reign is our aspiration. This is consistent with the Judeo-Christian concept of God, who is with us. It is not God up there and out there. It is God with us. Emmanuel. This is a relationship with the divine where the creature can know and be known by the Creator. Christianity then is not just about God but about God in relationship with us, as Karl Barth termed it ‘theoanthropolgy’. God with humanity.

Jesus’ prayer uses only eight words to acknowledge this strong and personal connection to God. Then the next part of the prayer is when we get into the asking. How brash, how brazen, how presumptuous, how rude – in just eight words we acknowledge our Creator’s divinity and then immediately we start

asking things of God. 'Give us...forgive us...lead us...deliver us.' It's rather pushy. And it isn't even couched in floral liturgical language. It doesn't actually sound very pious at all. There isn't even a please at the outset. No 'dear, blessed, sweet, Jesus, if it so pleaseth thee, by the grace of thy holy wisdom may thy possibly, maybe, if it isn't too much trouble consider granting this one teeny tiny most humble request, we beseech thee?' No, that is not how Jesus teaches them to pray. He says just say, 'give us, forgive us, lead us and deliver us'. Wonderfully simple, straightforward, and very human.

That is the important point, Jesus assumes that these prayers will be lifted up by mere mortals - humans who know just how difficult it is to be human, those who might know the Way but not the way to the Way. These prayers, Jesus assumes, will be uttered out of a condition of real necessity. And what we know about prayers uttered out of a condition of real necessity is that there is neither the inclination nor the time for pretence. President Lincoln said, "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day." 'Give us, forgive us, lead us and deliver us.'

When we ask these things of our Creator we are not actually being brazen, we are falling to our knees because we realize we have nowhere else to go. Jesus in teaching us to pray this way is teaching us a posture where we acknowledge three things, three things that make Washingtonians incredibly uncomfortable. 1) When you pray, 'give us' - you are saying that you are dependent - dependent on God's provision - you cannot actually get everything you need all by yourself. 2) When you pray, 'forgive us' - you are admitting that you are guilty - you not blameless and without fault, like you would say to the newspapers - but instead we admit we have done wrong things, bad things, sinful things and we need our Creator's forgiveness. 3) When you pray, 'lead us' & 'deliver us' - you are admitting you are lost and vulnerable - you don't know the way to the Way - your life needs guidance, direction, and support to get where you are supposed to be going. In this prayer, in these requests, you have acknowledged that you are dependent, guilty, lost, and vulnerable - ugh, what a bad combination!

And yet, in this posture, a posture of weakness, it is where we encounter the strength of the Lord. Prayer is not a meek, contrived, pious act - prayer is the act of those who know their profound need for God. And Jesus teaches us that to pray, the only prerequisite is sufficient recognition of the depth of our need and enough humility to ask for help.

In this simple prayer, Jesus teaches us to acknowledge God as divine Creator and to boldly admit our need for this Creator. Ask, knock, seek. That's the formula. Your faith does not have to be perfect. Your words do not have to be polished. Your knees do not even need to be on the ground. And there is one final secret about prayer that Jesus reveals in this passage from Luke. As much as you might try to find the right time or words or way to pray it is actually not about you - yet another crushing blow to our egos. Prayer is about God. God is like a loving

parent who loves his own and wants to help those in need. A loving parent would never give a scorpion to one who begged for an egg. A loving father would never hand over a snake when a fish was requested.

I remember a Christmas in high school when I really wanted a pair of jeans from this French designer, Girbaud. A few kids in my school had them and my older cousin let me try on the pair she got for her birthday. They were the coolest jeans ever and at least three times the price of the standard order denim for teenagers in Minnesota. But I begged for these jeans and I neeeeeeeeeeeded these jeans. On Christmas morning, a box appeared under the tree with my name on it. It looked like the right size for a pair of jeans; it felt like the right weight for a pair of jeans, it even smelled like a designer label, you know that slightly pretentious smell of a department store with live piano music and escalators flanked with gigantic floral arrangements? Anyway, it was finally my turn to open my present and I'll be darned if it wasn't a pair of Levis. Right size, right color, wrong smell!

Let's be clear, prayers for designer jeans, good parking spots, or perfect scores on tests when we haven't studied do not fall in the category of desperate and humble prayers of need. A prayer for an egg or a prayer for bread is a prayer for basic needs, sustenance from above, and the provision of what is needed to get us through the day. Those are the kind of prayers Jesus is thinking about when he says, 'ask, seek, knock.' Give us this day our daily bread.

The images of a loving parent handing over a scorpion or a snake to their child in need is ridiculous. Just as ridiculous as the image of a loving creator who would not listen to creations cries for help. The nature of God is that of the most loving, most caring, most empathetic parent. And so we see that, our prayers are not effective because of our proper cajoling with the right order of words but because of God's remarkably loving, gracious, and generous nature. If we can remember this distinct image of a parent who would never hand over a snake or a scorpion to a child in need, then we might be more embolden to worry less about the words of our prayers and think more about the recipient of our prayers, a loving Father, whose name is hallowed and whose reign we seek for our lives.

New Testament scholar John Douglas Hall said, "Where we bring our need to God's love in faith, that is prayer." Need + faith + God's love = prayer. The Christian life is spent as we lift up prayers, acknowledging our great need of God and humbly asking for help finding the way to the Way. Do not feel inadequate in your prayers, even though your prayers are signs of your weakness because they also signs of your abiding hope in God's strength.

May all of your prayers, your desperate, humble, and earnest prayers be answered.

Amen.