

## Prayer, the Ultimate Subversive Act

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, July 29, 2007*

*Almighty God, to whom our needs are known before we ask: Help us to ask only what accords with your will; and those good things which we dare not, or in our blindness cannot ask, grant us for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

The disciples have known Jesus for, what, two years at this point in his ministry? They have watched him teach the crowds, heal the sick, feed the poor, raise the dead. Most of all, they have seen him pray. He went off by himself to pray when he heard that his cousin John the Baptist died. He takes time off from the crowds in order to pray. When they are with him, he prays all the time. And after all this time, they ask him to teach them to pray?

To Jesus, praying is as natural and as essential to life as eating and sleeping. So their question, "Teach us to pray," must have sounded almost like "Teach us how to eat." I do not think that Jesus thought of prayer as a skill to learn like riding a bicycle or writing an essay, things that will help someone succeed in life, but he accommodates them by giving them the basic words that we know as the Lord's Prayer, shortened in Luke from the longer version in Matthew. And then he answered their real question: When we pray, what are we doing, and who are we dealing with?

Obviously prayer is not a tool, or an order form, or a bureaucratic process for submitting your desires. Nor is it a question and answer session with God, or an exercise in wishful thinking, or the Great Oz, though we sometimes treat our prayers as if they were these things, as if prayer were merely method and mechanics. The disciples might have been asking about the mechanics, but Jesus tells them about God. Because prayer is simply a name for being with God. The fact that we formalize it by giving it a name keeps us from seeing it as our way of being with God. Then like the disciples, we too ask, "How do I pray?" or we complain "I don't know how to pray." We have known people – it may be ourselves -- who like the disciples are uncomfortable or unsure about praying, or who say that they don't know how, or are afraid to pray, or are afraid that they won't "do it right," or who don't pray daily because they say they "don't know what to say." And we are all familiar with questions like "Does it do any good to pray?" "Does God answer our prayers?"

I want to give you another way to look at prayer, just by looking at Jesus. Jesus' life *was* prayer, insofar as prayer is being with God. For Jesus, prayer was done as often and as naturally as breathing. I believe he prayed without ceasing, as St. Paul put it, and all his life and his ministry were prayer in action, his way of being with God his Father. Prayer is not about means and ends, or results, or requests answered. It is precisely a relationship that is at the center of prayer. That's pretty simple, but the implications are deep and profound. It's not about skills, or mechanics, or the right words. It is a call to God from the depths of the Spirit, an encounter from our deepest selves with the living God our divine Beloved.

Perhaps because our relationship with God is so utterly personal, it is hard to talk generally about prayer, the act that nurtures and shapes that relationship. Everyone needs to find the way that fits

them. I cherish Morning Prayer, as a way of saying “Good morning” to God. Another person I know says that often when he wakes up, he doesn’t want to say “Good morning, God.” He wants to say “*Good God, it’s morning!*”

I think the scary thing about being with God is how utterly vulnerable and open, exposed we are. There is no dissembling, no denial, no falsehood in dealing with God. There is only ourselves. Whether or not we want to, we approach God in utter honesty. That’s not the way we usually act in this world, where we learn to try to make the best impression, to hide our faults, to be afraid of looking bad. You may recall what St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit.” That’s both scary -- when we are afraid of what God might find in our heart – and it’s reassuring – knowing that the Spirit will help us pray for our real needs. With God, we face the truth in ourselves. God sees the truth in us. And in response, we are compelled to trust God – trust God to love us anyway, to forgive us, to be merciful and gracious, and not to give us snakes when we need fish. In prayer we give ourselves in trust, giving up any semblance that we are in control. We give ourselves in need, even when in the outside world we have to pretend we are independent and in control. We give ourselves in hope, that God loves us and will still be with us even in our ignorance, our blindness, and our willfulness. And mostly, we give ourselves in a profoundly personal act of authentic self-giving, in a world of masks. That can be scary. Prayer takes courage. And when we do it anyway, in spite of everything, prayer becomes a subversive act.

Yes, the very fact that we pray to God is subversive. It shows strength and courage to pray. To pray is to say yes in a world that too often says no. To pray is to say yes to hope, yes to life, yes to God. At the very least, no matter how tentatively we might pray, it is a decision to put our trust in God even if the world looks godless. When we pray in hope, we break down walls of despair that threaten to separate us from caring and compassion. When we pray for our own needs and those of others, or for the world, we speak in defiance against those who would say that “it doesn’t matter what we do.” When we pray from the depths of our heart, we stand for truth in a world that takes falsehood and denial for granted. When we give thanks to God, we challenge the apathy in this culture that blinds us to the joy and wonder of life. When we pray in need and longing, we defy a cynical world that tells us to resign ourselves and accept the way things are, just to get along. Subversive acts. May we always say yes like this – yes to hope, yes to life, yes to God.

Let us pray this prayer from Ignatius of Loyola: *Receive, Lord, all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my whole will. You have given me all that I have, all that I am, and I surrender all to your divine will, that you dispose of me. Give me only your love and your grace. With this I am rich enough, and have no more to ask. Amen.*