

## Pentecost 9C

July 25, 2010

*Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ*

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Genesis 18:20—32 Psalm 138 Colossians 2:6—15 [16—19] ***Luke 11:1—13***

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Have you ever found it curious, in today's Gospel text from Luke, that the disciples should ask Jesus how they should pray? Here they had spent all this time with Jesus, and they had witnessed him praying on many occasions. He would pray about everything. For instance, Jesus prayed at His baptism<sup>1</sup>, he prayed before the choosing of the twelve<sup>2</sup>, when the crowds began to increase<sup>3</sup>, before he asked the twelve for their confession of faith<sup>4</sup>, and at his Transfiguration<sup>5</sup>.

Despite the model that Jesus had set for them, today we hear the disciples asking Jesus how they should pray. Now, I suppose this was a very natural thing for a Jew of Jesus' day to ask. Form was *very* important. Knowing how to *properly* perform the ritual, any ritual – including prayer – according to the dictates of the law was important.

Jesus responds by teaching them a very simple prayer. He said,

When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

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1 Luke 3:21

2 Luke 6:12

3 Luke 5:16

4 Luke 9:18

5 Luke 9:29

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.

This, of course, is what has become what we call The Lord's Prayer.

Jesus then follows this with a parable, as if to illustrate his point about prayer.

In this parable Jesus teaches that the man will respond to his friend's persistence when he says, "Even though the man will not get up and give his friend anything [to eat] because he is his friend, at least because of the friend's persistence the man will get up and give his friend whatever he needs." Jesus then tells us that we need but to ask, and our needs will be satisfied.

I'm reminded of a story once told by famous radio man Paul Harvey. He said we should be like the 3-year-old boy who went to the grocery store with his mother. Before they entered the grocery store she said to him, "Now you're not going to get any chocolate chip cookies, so don't even ask."

She put him up in the cart and he sat in the little child's seat while she wheeled down the aisles. He was doing just fine until they came to the cookie section. He saw the chocolate chip cookies and he stood up in the seat and said, "Mom, can I have some chocolate chip cookies?" She said, "I told you not even to ask. You're not going to get any at all." So he sat back down.

They continued down the aisles, but in their search for certain items they ended up back in the cookie aisle. “Mom, can I please have some chocolate chip cookies?” She said, “I told you that you can’t have any. Now sit down and be quiet.”

Finally, they were approaching the checkout lane. The little boy sensed that this may be his last chance. So just before they got to the line, he stood up on the seat of the cart and shouted in his loudest voice, “*IN THE NAME OF JESUS, MAY I HAVE SOME CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES?!?*”

And everybody around just laughed. Some even applauded. And, due to the generosity of the other shoppers, the little boy and his mother left with 23 boxes of chocolate chip cookies.

This little boy's persistence certainly paid off.

But I'd like to get back to the topic of exactly *how* we should pray. First of all it might be helpful if we have a working definition of prayer. For our purposes today, we'll say that prayer is a way of communicating with God. I think a lot of us probably view prayer as being somewhat like picking up a phone and calling God. I would also guess that for most of us this turns out to be a rather one-sided conversation, making our appeals and request to God, and waiting in the silence to hear some word, any word, from God that our requests will be met.

One of the functions of prayer is, indeed, asking God for our needs to be met. After all, Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given you,” and, “Everyone who ask receives.” But does that mean that God will give us *everything* we ask for? I don't think so. At least, that's not my personal experience.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book *Who Needs God?*, says that modern man has confused God with Santa Claus. He says that, “We think that prayer means giving God the list of things we want and assuring Him that we have been good girls and boys and deserve to get them.”<sup>6</sup>

Kushner also points out that perhaps the point of prayer is not to get God to give us things; perhaps the point is to help conform us to God's will. It is also an acknowledgment that we rely on God. He says, “To ask God for these things is not to order items from a heavenly catalog, but to overcome the illusion of self-sufficiency and confess... dependence.”<sup>7</sup>

Another author put it this way: “Prayer is surrender – surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boat hook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God.”<sup>8</sup>

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6 Harold Kushner, *Who Needs God?* (New York: Pocket Books, 1989), 146.

7 Kushner, 158.

8 E. Stanley Jones in Kent & Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 1988) 73.

So this brings us to Jesus' final point in today's Gospel reading. Jesus likens our relationship with God to the relationship between a parent and child. He says, Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! Just as a parent will give good things to the child that the child requests and needs, so, too, will our Heavenly Father do for us. Not only that, but God has only the best in mind for us, if we would only open up our minds and hearts to conform our will to His.

So, having established what prayer is – communication with God – and that at best prayer is conforming our own will to God's, Rabbi Kushner poses a final question: Can modern people pray? My response to that is yes, but we've certainly made it hard on ourselves. We keep our lives filled with constant busy-ness. Kushner says that, “Some people create lives of holiness all by themselves... [but] most of us need a structure and the company of other people to do it.”<sup>9</sup> We need the Christian community, and we need sacred spaces.

I'm reminded of a trip I once took to the National Basilica and the National

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<sup>9</sup> Kushner, 16.

Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Upon entering places such as these, it's almost impossible to deny that some transcendental connection has taken place. The soaring ceilings, bright mosaics, elaborate appointments, and myriad little prayer chapels in which one may go pray for any problem imaginable. And if that's not enough, there are other aides to help you make that cosmic connection with God: prayer beads, candles, incense and the like. These are all things which help us create that holy space in which communication with God may take place.

Many times we find it easier to “connect” with God in our prayer lives when we have such sacred spaces. These sacred spaces mark a time and a place that is devoted to God. When we maintain the sanctity of holy spaces it is easy to find someplace to retreat to for our private prayer time.

But the problem is, we've de-sacralized places formerly thought of as “holy.” These places have become ordinary. For instance, the church I grew up in tasked a family to clean the church every week. As we went about our chores in the sanctuary, my mother told us that we should do it quietly and reverently. Every time we'd pass the altar, we'd pause a moment to bow and say a little prayer.

It used to be when you'd go into a church you'd see many people do a little kneel, or bow, or even a full-blown genuflect each time they'd pass in front of the altar. Not so much anymore, and that's a shame. These small actions are

acknowledgments that this is a holy space. This is a place where we come to meet God.

Rabbi Kushner gives us some hope. He says that, “Prayer is first and foremost the experience of being in the presence of God.” If this is true – and I think it is – we can reclaim the sanctity of our holy space, and indeed, prayer can sanctify any place. Any place where you pray can become a holy space. It doesn't have to be in a church, chapel, or at the altar rail. You can always and everywhere be in the presence of God. All you have to do is pick up that prayer “phone” and start talking. He's listening.

Knowing that God is there to listen at any time makes our lives a holy space. Our lives are places where God dwells, always. So I encourage you to pray often, and everywhere. Pray in your car, in the line at the check-out, at your desk at work. God doesn't need elaborate rituals, and there's no formula to do it “just right.” But pray often. Be persistent, like the man in our Gospel story. I promise it will be a life-changing experience.

Amen.

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