

A friend of mine has two small children. His kids were quietly playing together when he heard one sibling ask the other: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” To which her brother answered, “Um, myself”

It seems as if since the day of our birth we have all been striving for the freedom to be truly that: ourselves. Not the people our parents may have dreamed we would become, not the people our peers pressured us to conform to, and not the people we thought we had to be in order to be loved.

Today’s Gospel is telling us the story about some friends who hung out with Jesus. They were with him when he roamed the country-side. They were with him when he stopped in the villages and cities. They were with him when he was in a crowd and when they had him all to themselves. They were with him in synagogues, at meals, at poolsides, and at sick-beds. They heard him teach and saw him heal. But, perhaps most interestingly, they were with him when he prayed.

Luke portrays Jesus as one who prays in all circumstances. Jesus prays at his baptism. He withdraws to deserted places and prays, sometimes spending the entire night in prayer. On many occasions, he chooses a mountain as his prayer-space. He taught his disciples about their own need to pray always and not to lose heart. And when they ask him to teach them to pray, he gives them a prayer which begins with who they really are: God’s children. “Our Father” is how it begins.

This past week I had the privilege of visiting with a member of our congregation who has been at St. Margaret’s for over more than half a century. We listened to this very same passage in Luke together. After a brief moment of silence, she said, “It’s hard to learn how to pray.”

Indeed. I wish I had asked her why it’s so hard and how she had overcome that difficulty, because it seems to me that prayer can never be mastered. I wonder how many of us here this morning feel like we don’t know how to pray, and I wonder if that stems from the feeling that we somehow aren’t doing it right. Or, it could stem from our doubts about God. Is God really there for me? Does it make sense to pray if I’m not sure about who God is and if God cares? What if I fervently pray for something and it doesn’t come to pass? Does that mean I am no good at praying or does it mean God doesn’t love me enough to come through? Of course,

the answer is neither of those things, since no matter how poor our prayer seems to us, God always hears and is there for us. Whenever we turn to God for help, God is there for us.

According to Luke, prayer is how followers of Jesus actually participate in God's commitment to bring forth God's reign. In the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples and in the parable he tells about praying, it is clear that when we pray, we are praying out of our need. At first, it seems like the disciples just want to know how to do what is expected of them. They ask, but Jesus takes them further. (Jesus always takes us further than our original request, it seems). They ask, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." So they knew about John and how John's disciples had learned about prayer from him. They perceived that to be a disciple would mean praying, and they wanted to be disciples, so they wanted to learn the kind of prayer that Jesus prayed.

How did you learn to pray? Who taught you? How has your prayer changed over the years? What attracts you to prayer and what makes you resist it?

The prayer that Jesus teaches us isn't careful or apologetic or polite. The one who prays gives four commands without ever saying please. Give, Forgive, Save, Deliver. Give us bread: give us what we need in order not to go hungry. Forgive us—you know how truly we need it. Forgive like we forgive our friends, and neighbors and colleagues and family—"for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us." Save us—keep us from getting into situations that would cause us to lose our faith in you. Deliver us from evil—protect us from everything and everyone that wants to take us away from you and separate us from your love. Yet, before asking, the one who prays begins by reminding God who God is by asking God to do what God most wants to do: to bring about God's reign right here right now and to inspire all creatures to live by the spirit of God who dwells within them.

Then, Jesus gives them an absurd example of how they can be unabashed and even pushy in the way they pray. He tells them about the friend who would not get up in the middle of the night to help out the friend who came knocking on his door. This would never happen in a culture where hospitality is so important. It wouldn't happen anywhere, for that matter, since the nature of friendship is to

help even when it is inconvenient. We'll go out of our way to help our friends. How much more will God go out of God's way to help us. All we have to do is ask. Even if we don't end up getting what we ask for, we will have entrusted ourselves into God's care and God will have listened. Being honest about what we need for our lives helps us to dwell in what is genuine, honest, and true, and to be open to whatever comes to us. Sometimes when we don't get what we pray for, we receive something even more life-giving than we could have imagined. And sometimes, prayer is the only way to get through times of life that are more difficult and painful than we could have imagined.

God knows our needs before we even ask. For example, God knows about the dread we feel about what is happening to our planet. God knows how we need to change in order to help it and heal it. It is in the asking that we become aware of God's care, God's love. Our focus shifts from the things we name in prayer to the God to whom we are praying. Somehow, the Holy Spirit helps us to loosen our grip on what it is we are asking for and gives us the ability to simply enjoy being with God and letting the spirit of the risen Christ inspire us and empower us to live with God in all things—in times of adversity and in times of blessing. Prayer moves us from fear to hope and from feeling frustrated or frozen to being creative and energetic. We are encouraged and strengthened for our journey. We become truer to ourselves, closer to our center, more authentically who we are. With God, nothing is impossible. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as in heaven.