

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

From Matthew 6---August 19, 2018

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None of us were born knowing how to pray. If we're lucky, in our Sunday School and role modeling at home, we should have learned some simple ways to pray.

I'm wondering if any of you were raised as I was. My folks prayed at church and before Sunday dinner. We had a rote table prayer for Sunday that Dad would mumble before Mom passed the pot roast. I didn't pray as a child at home and I don't remember learning any prayers in Sunday school as a young child. We were prayed for or even at times prayed at.

I heard grown up prayers with words I didn't know and phrases I couldn't follow. I assumed praying was a grown up thing, and I would learn it later.

So imagine at Sunday dinner one day...I was probably 8 years old...my Father turned his stern gaze on me and said, "Why don't you pray for us today?" He stared and he stared. Now, this is well before phrases like "having that "deer in headlights" look or "I have no words", but that was me. I literally had no words.

I was not ready for this debut. I was mortified. Nobody stepped in to let me off the hook, either, so I did what I always did when humiliated, I ran to my room, closed the door, and cried. I was sad because I wanted to act grown up and pray but I was a child and I had been given no words.

Looking back, I trust that God heard my bedroom cries as my prayer as a prayer to Him.

Do you remember the first time you were asked to pray for a group? And pray out loud? Do you remember what it felt like? (dog PIX) We've all had instances I am sure when "extemporaneous" prayer felt more like public torture.

Parenting has changed in half a century, thank you, God. Parents and grandparents seem more tuned in to the developmental needs of their kids... intellectual and social needs, but their spiritual development, too. (Lord's Prayer PIX)

I know parents who work with their kids on learning simple prayers and finding times throughout the day for prayer...even it just a goodnight and good morning to God. Or a simple table grace. Children learn from the intimacy shared with their parents during prayer. Kids create a picture of God as loving parent...a God who will sit with them in throughout their lives.

I love what Leanne and Scott introduced here with our children's time...ending with a simple prayer that is repeated line by line. And when did we all begin joining in on that prayer? It is wonderful. Right away kids experience being a part of a larger praying community. It was truly a God thing. I may get more out of it than they do.

As time went along for me in my raggedy prayer life, I decided to take it on myself to learn this skill. I love to learn through researching something so purchased this resource feeling it was the most appropriate one for me at the time. (Idiot's Guide to...)

The best thing I learned from this book was that even after reading it, I still feel like an idiot at prayer. And that's okay. We connect with God when we humble ourselves. We need to put away notions that somehow we are more, smarter, better, wiser, not an idiot.

But above all, I discovered prayer is best learned together in communities of faith, not from a book. But in the family, in the church. Hopefully both.

So, along the way growing up in my Congregational Church in Downers Grove, IL, I learned the Lord's Prayer. I learned it phrase by phrase, working to get the order right and finally, over time, it just became part of me. I don't remember when that happened. Now as I look back, I can't remember a time I didn't know the Lord's Prayer.

It's taken me a very long time to appreciate why adults encourage kids to memorize words of scripture, prayers, affirmations. As a kid, I never heard a good reason from those adults. "Because I said so" was not a popular one for me and "you'll know when you get to be my age" wasn't a big hit either, partly since I couldn't imagine being that old.

But as an older, wiser woman, I do get it. It is because these words nurture our spirits, they give us the words to say to God when we have no words of our own, they hold us together and they bind us as one people.

Do you recall last spring, Leanne told us about her mom who even after losing so much of her vision, could still play the organ for church. The hymns she had played so many times had become part of her. She could sit at the organ and the music just sprang forth. The Lord's Prayer is like that for me, it is part of me, it is part of who I am. With each passing year, it's a bigger part of me. More full of promise, more intimate.

The disciples observed Jesus in his life of prayer. They watched as he seemed to hear his own call to pray and then he would just take off for a while. They observed this close relationship Jesus had with his Father and the power and nurture he received. They wanted that. They wanted to pray as Jesus prayed.

Jesus taught this prayer to his disciples as an example of how we are to pray. Straight forward, simple, praying for the world, praying for our own needs (notice, Our needs, not just my needs). And praising God as all powerful. Yet the words of this prayer are so perfect as they've come down to us, that it has become our anchor, our place to go to find God's presence....just the way it is.

And to pray, Jesus tells them first, to address God as Father just as he does. He is including them as children of God. Secondly, though you are praying for yourselves you're praying for all children of God. And so we begin by saying Our Father, not my Father.

And finally, speak to God not about God. We are in relationship with our Father and so we speak to Him directly. You may have heard public prayers that start fine and then wander off into a second sermon. Speak to God not about God....All good reminders.

I have experienced the saving grace of this prayer in so many situations...as many of you have. Together with the pastors, holding hands all around Arlen's hospital bed. The pastors take the lead as the two of us are worn down and worn out and they pray for us both... and then we find our way to the Lord's Prayer. There is such reassurance in this, comfort, and peace. Thank you Lord, I don't have words of my own. Thank you for giving us yours.

Sitting at a funeral recently and looking around at all the people I don't recognize. Who are all these people? What is their connection to Murial? So many strangers. Until we join together in the Lord's Prayer. "Our Father, who art in heaven..."

All at once, we are one in God, children of the heavenly Father. I feel connected to these people. Some are loud, some are quieter. The Presbyterians wait graciously for the Lutherans to catch up on the debt/trespases part, and it's all good. Strangers at the start of the service through one very special prayer now a community united in our faith in a loving God.

Alida Rampaart has a special way of speaking about this prayer. She always prays this in her native tongue, Dutch language. As she explained to me, words of anger and words of love are best spoken in your mother tongue and this prayer is of love.

I have invited Alida to join me because we want to end with this beautiful prayer. Our Father who art in heaven...hallowed be thy name...thy kingdom come...thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...Give us this day our daily bread...And forgive us our debt as we forgive our debtors...and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil...for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever...Amen.