

What is the first prayer you remember saying? Perhaps it is the Lord's Prayer, which we just heard in today's Gospel. Perhaps a dinner grace comes to mind: *Bless us, oh Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy bounty. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.* Maybe it's a bedtime prayer like the one my grandmother taught me: *There are four corners on my bed, there are four saints around my head: Matthew, Mark, good Luke, and John, bless this bed that I lie on.*

These prayers live in my heart, at a level below my conscious mind. I know I didn't say the *four saints* prayer for at least fifteen years, but then one night my grandmother said, *do you remember*, and began the prayer, and I immediately finished it with her from memory. What we pray as a community, whether the community is the church or a parent and child at the bedside, we learn at a deep level. These prayers dwell within me. They mold me. They've changed me.

This is what I think of when I read the first part of today's gospel. A disciple says to Jesus, *teach me how to pray*, and he replies: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. 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 is a prayer about change.

Each of the petitions is focused on bringing the kingdom of God to this world. The kingdom of God- the literal kingship of Jesus and not the powers of this world, when justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,<sup>1</sup> when there will be no suffering, no one who is hungry, no one imprisoned, or poor, or oppressed. This prayer is about that future kingdom, and it's also about the Kingdom of God in the here and now, which exists within each of us insofar as we conform our hearts to Christ. *Teach me how to pray*, the disciple says, and Jesus offers a prayer about who we are and whose we are, about letting our relationship with God change us.

*Hallowed by your name*: may your name be holy, set apart within me, honored above all other names. *Your kingdom come*: this is a hope for the kingdom of the future, sure, but it's

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<sup>1</sup> Amos 5:24

mostly about right now, the kingdom within us, the reign of God when we put God first. This is what the parables speak about, the seeds growing in the good soil of our hearts, the hope that flourishes when everything else seems dry and cracked, the love for God and neighbor that we cultivate.

*Give us each our daily bread:* I hear in this petition the acknowledgement that *everything comes from God*. We can't grow it ourselves- we plant the seeds, we water the earth, but it is *God* who gives the growth. We don't *earn* our bread, we don't *deserve* the things we have. It's all a gift from God, and naming that teaches us gratitude and maybe, just maybe, helps us unclench our hands from what we call our own and share it, as Jesus did, with the hungry.

*Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us:* God, please overlook the wrong I have done, because I do not hold anyone else's debts over them. This is a hard one. This is one where I sometimes have to *fake it 'til I make it*, where I have to name forgiveness until the anger or hurt slowly lets go. Jesus teaches us that God forgives anything, God forgives us, and that we have to do that same work.

*Do not bring us to the time of trial:* the best translation I found of this petition, the one that helps me understand it best, is "help us not to give into temptation."<sup>2</sup> We are tempted by so many things: by pride when life is good; by envy or anger when things are going poorly, by despair when things are really bad and we can't see how God would allow this kind of suffering. Temptation is everywhere, so Jesus reminds us to pray for God's grace to help us stand up to it.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus offers his disciples, and us, a prayer based on relationship with God, a relationship that will change us. It's a template for admitting that we belong to God and need help living up to the God in whose image we are made: help me put God first, help me be forgiving, help me welcome the Kingdom of God in my heart and work for its arrival in the world. Prayer changes us, when we let it.

If the passage ended after the Lord's Prayer, my sermon would be pretty simple. But it *doesn't* end there; instead, it continues with a parable and sayings about persistence and answered prayers. This is where it gets dicey. This is where I struggle.

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<sup>2</sup> (<https://liturgy.co.nz/save-us-from-the-time-of-trial>)

<sup>3</sup> (<https://liturgy.co.nz/save-us-from-the-time-of-trial>)

The parable tells us that persistence is a virtue. If we are persistent, we will get what we ask for, just like the man who knocks on his neighbor's door in the middle of the night. All we have to do is keep asking and God will give us whatever we want. Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will open.

The problem is, of course, that sometimes we don't receive. We don't find. The door remains firmly shut. We might blame ourselves- I'm not praying right, or hard enough. I don't live a holy enough life. Or we might find fault in God, who tells us to ask and yet does not give us the one thing we most desperately need right now. The suffering continues; the job ends; the child runs away; the marriage implodes. What good is persistence when the world falls apart anyway?

When I get angry about the gospel I know there's something I need to learn. If the idea of persistence is uncomfortable, that's where I dig. Ironically for this particular passage, I prayed. I tried to listen for the hope and Good News to which I was blind, and here's what I have to offer: perhaps the answers, the finding, the open doors do not correspond one-to-one with getting what we want, even when the thing we want is really, really important. Persistence *is* a virtue, but not because we get what we want or what we think we need. Persistence in prayer is a virtue because persistence in relationship is a virtue, *especially* in our relationship with God. It matters that the teaching about persistence comes just after the Lord's Prayer. If Jesus teaches us to pray for inner transformation, to be changed by the relationship with God the Father, then persistence isn't about getting just what we want. It's about becoming more who we are meant to be, who we are created to be.

*This* is the context in which persistence is hopeful. The world is messy. Humanity's imperfect choices and actions mean an imperfect world, a world with suffering and war and pain. Our own fragility, our mortality, means that we experience loss. So much is beyond our control, but not everything. We can ask God to shape our hearts, to prepare our souls for the work of the kingdom. This is a well that does not run dry. When we cannot imagine life improving, we turn to God who is the source of everything we have. When we are being strangled by anger and resentment, we bring it to God who forgives us as we try to forgive. When we suffer, when we see others suffer, we invite God's kingdom in our hearts and in the world, and we open ourselves to the possibility that saying *thy kingdom come* may require

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more of us, may require hard work and brave actions. We can be persistent in our prayers. God hears us, and we are changed.

This doesn't mean we don't pray for healing, or for an end to suffering, or for a new job, or a better relationship with a spouse, a child, a parent, a friend. No, we pray without ceasing, and I truly believe that God hears our prayers. But this gospel reminds us that prayer is as much about our transformation as it is about asking God to *do* something. Our persistence in praying deepens our relationship with God. Our persistence teaches us to find hope in God's presence and in God's promise. The door that opens may not be the one we expect, but prayer teaches us that God is always, always with us, and never leaves us where we are. So we pray. We pray the words of the Lord's Prayer, we pray using any words at all, or no words, but we pray. Persistently. And we let it change us. Amen.