

Hosea 1:2-10, Colossians 2:6-19, Luke 11:1-13

In today's passage from the Gospel we have something that strikes me as odd. We have the followers of Jesus asking him how to pray. Everyone in the crowd is Jewish. Every faithful Jew knew how to pray, if nothing else, then they knew the *Shema Yisrael*: "Hear, O Israel: God is our Lord, God is one." It was said, or prayed, upon rising in the morning and retiring at night. And traditionally it is a Jew's last words on earth.

These are a people of prayer. Their culture was infused with prayer – from the wearing of prayer shawls to the prayers said before meals. So what was it that they really wanted? What they may have been saying was "*Teach us how to pray like you.*" What was it about the prayer life of Jesus that these followers were so moved by?

We get a hint from another Jewish teacher, the 20<sup>th</sup> century rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. He defines prayer as "an invitation to God to intervene in our lives."

Think for a moment about how you issue invitations. To a friend knocking on your door you say, "Come in." For a momentous occasion, like a wedding, you send out announcements in the mail. Prayer is an invitation to God to intervene in our life.

It really is our job to keep extending the invitation. So that prayer becomes a *perpetual inner attitude*, as Rabbi Heschel puts it. He says prayer aligns us toward the holy.<sup>1</sup> Like how a houseplant aligns itself towards the sun. No matter where you place a plant in your house, the leaves will always seek sunlight.

No matter where we are placed in life – whether in good times or bad – prayer aligns *us* towards light, to the One who is Light and Love. Prayer is an invitation to God to infuse our lives the way a teabag infuses a cup of hot water. Very quickly the water becomes tea. Very quickly we become like God. Like Jesus. I think this is what his followers wanted when they said, "Teach us how to pray."

But where does the desire to pray come from?

Lloyd John Ogilvie was startled to learn the answer to that question. Dr. Ogilvie was Chaplain of the U.S. Senate. He is the author of more than forty books. In the 1990's, he was recognized as one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English-speaking world. And yet, even with all that, he once wrote:

I've been a Christian for 44 years. For too many of those years, I held an incorrect concept of prayer. I believed prayer was my idea; that my conversations with God were initiated by me. I believed I had to get God's attention, with the right words, and that God would neither listen nor respond until I led a life worthy of God's notice. Prayer became a labor.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From "God is Prayer," by Maurice Friedman in *The Power of Prayer*, ed. Dale Salwak, 1998, page 27

<sup>2</sup> From "Prayer Starts with God," by Lloyd John Ogilvie in *The Power of Prayer*, ed. Dale Salwak, 1998, page 96

Then Dr. Ogilvie happened on a combination of scripture passages that expressed a truth he never knew. It is that prayer starts with God. Prayer is God's idea. Our desire to pray is the result of God's longing to receive an invitation from us.<sup>3</sup>

When we respond to an invitation and arrive at, say, a dinner or lunch, there is often a period of formality. People may be a little stiff. They talk and nod but the laughter hasn't yet begun. Have you ever noticed how bonded you can feel with others once the formality is past? Perhaps when everyone is laughing?

That feeling of connection or bonding is what in religious language is called "communion." We are actually communing with one another – even at a party! – when we let down our barriers; when we begin to flow easily with what's going on around us. You can go on a hike to commune with the outdoors, or to accomplish something, like pick mushrooms or take photographs. When your goal is to commune with, you will be in a different state of mind. Literally.

Our brain waves function in beta mode when we're fully engaged with a task. We slip into alpha mode – a relaxed state – when the day is done and we can relax. The barriers go down. We soften a bit. When we're in a state of communing with, our brains are in alpha.

I think this in the backstory to "The Lord's Prayer," as we call it, that Jesus gave his followers that day. He gave them a task – a beta task – with the intention that the alpha state would follow just as it does in our daily rhythm of life.

The beta task is wonderful. Jesus is saying that we should concentrate on certain realities about God. Then he names them. God is our parent and we are family. God's name is, therefore, our name and it is hallowed or special. God's kingdom of justice and peace will come – may we not forget that in spite of everything that's going wrong around us. We can bet on that just as we can bet that God will provide for us: both daily bread and forgiveness.

After the beta comes the alpha, the communing. The notion of prayer as communing with God began to gain traction in the 1970's. A groundswell of interest in prayer erupted after the church of the 40's, 50's, and 60's simply did not address the inner life of its members.

Scores, then hundreds of people came to a monastery in Massachusetts – both Protestants and Catholics alike – because they knew the monks there were reviving an ancient form of mystic prayer. Under leadership of their abbot, Thomas Keating, they called it "Centering Prayer" and it is today a worldwide phenomenon.

One of the key attributes of Centering Prayer is silence. Silence is revered in most spiritual traditions, including that of Native Americans. In her essay, "The Power of Silence," Brooke Medicine Eagle writes:

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

An important aspect of mental silence is to stop the inner chatter through which we continually create our world. We put our world together and create the images through which we determine our reality through internal dialogue. In order for the *new* to become available to us, we must stop the noise.<sup>4</sup>

When we silence our own noise – crowd out all the language – drop out of the beta mode, we are issuing an invitation for God to intervene in our lives. Learning to move beyond words in prayer is not easy. Famous Anglican writer and mystic, Evelyn Underhill, writes:

The first quarter of an hour thus spent in attempted meditation will be, indeed, a time of warfare; which should at least convince you how unruly, how ill-educated is your attention, how miserably ineffective your will, how far away you are from the captaincy of your own soul."<sup>5</sup>

Prayer can be a battle with one's own sloth or lassitude. But that battle well fought, even by minutes each day – 15 minutes here; 20 minutes there – can win for us that *perpetual inner attitude* of constantly being open to God. And that is something worth fighting for.

Why not use some of the alpha time of summer – assuming you have some – to examine your prayer life. Is it a perpetual inner attitude of openness to God? Do you really believe that God longs to commune with you? Are you like Dr. Ogilvie, Chaplain to the Senate, who labored just to be good enough to pray?

To kick-start this project, why not use the next half-hour to practice a different form of listening. For the remainder of our worship time, be aware of three different things – all at the same time. Paradoxically, this will deepen your capacity to engage in silence, because it fosters mindfulness:

Listen to what is said – in word and song. Listen to your own response to what is said. But listen also to what God says in the midst of those other two experiences.

Listen to what is said; listen to your response; listen to God.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> From "The Power of Silence," by Brooke Medicine Eagle in *The Power of Prayer*, ed. Dale Salwak, 1998, page 148

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *Sanctuary of the Soul*, by Richard Foster, IVP Books, Downers Grove, IL, 2011, page 60