

WHEN WORDS ESCAPE US

This morning I want to talk about prayer.

What does it mean to pray? How can we mere mortal beings possibly know what to ask for or what we should say to Almighty God?

In the fourteenth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus said, ". . . if you ask for anything in my name, I will do it for you so that the Father's glory will be shown through the Son." "If you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it for you." But how does one pray "in Jesus' name"? Does it mean we're supposed to pray the way Jesus did?

To me, that sounds a little intimidating. Maybe even a lot intimidating. I mean, personally, I can be kind of selfish. Sometimes it's all about Fred! But when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane facing death on a cross, he prayed to God, "Not my will, but yours be done."

I want to see justice done and evildoers punished. I don't like it when wicked people—you know, drug dealers and child molesters and mass murderers—get away with the things they've done wrong. And when a serious wrong has been done to me . . . well, let's just say I don't usually ask God to bless those who have mistreated me. But when Jesus hung in agony on the cross, he gazed down at his tormentors, the very people who were killing him unjustly, and prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

Forgive them! That's an incredibly high standard to attain. I think I'm going to need to apply for an exemption for those times when I'm just not able to forgive people the way Jesus forgave his persecutors, and the way God has forgiven me.

I often look with sorrow, frustration and anger at the world in all its pain and brokenness: innocent people murdered; children suffering from malnutrition and even starving to death; the greed of the wealthy running rampant while the majority of people on earth are lucky to eke out a living with low paying jobs or Social Security checks; an earth that's churning with hatred and injustice; wars over land that belongs to no one but God and violent

conflicts to defend ideologies that, in the whole scheme of things, mean little or nothing; a planet with an ever-warming climate, a growing human population and a constantly declining amount of resources to sustain that human population; and I often pray to God to make it stop.

Please, dear Lord, save us from ourselves.

But, to be perfectly honest, prayers like that often seem pointless and not very ineffective. Sadly, because of past experience, I don't always have faith that my prayers for the world will be answered—well, at least answered the way I believe God should answer them. And then I remember the words of Jesus: “. . . your faith is too small. I tell you the truth, if your faith is as big as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. All things will be possible for you.”

So, where is my mustard seed-sized faith when I need it?

When it came to prayer, Jesus sure had a very different perspective than I do. So again I ask the question, how do we know what to say to God or what we're to ask of God in our prayers? And how do we pray to God in Jesus' name?

You all know that I'm a pastor. I've been trained, and now I'm being paid, to, among other things, intercede for God's people; to bring their deepest needs and most heart-felt yearnings before the altar of God. I make my living speaking to, advising and comforting the spiritually needy when they're struggling with their faith. And yet, even I—no, especially I—don't always know what to say, much less how to pray, when people come to me, or I go to them, and they expect me to help strengthen their trust in God with a prayer.

Some time ago I was at the Gosnell House, visiting an elderly woman in the hospice program. I was told that she had about a day or two left to live. When I walked into her room, I saw this woman lying in her bed, looking very frail. Her daughter was kneeling by her side, weeping softly.

Without intending to, I overheard some of what the dying mother said to her daughter: “It's okay. I've had a good life. You're a wonderful daughter. I'll always love you.” I felt as though I had walked in on a very sacred and personal moment—a moment I had no right to be a part of—and very quietly I started to step back out of the room. But the daughter noticed me and said, “No, please don't go. Mom and I want you here. Would you say a prayer for us?”

I made my way over to the bed, took both of their hands in mine, and said nothing for a time. Because I didn't know what to say. I wasn't sure what the right, the appropriate and most helpful words would be. So I was speechless for a while, which was fine because silence can be a good thing. But eventually I was going to have to say something.

Holding hands was nice, but it didn't go far enough. The daughter and dying mother wanted more. They needed more. They deserved more. After a while I managed to blurt out a prayer, which to my own ears sounded very inadequate for the situation.

We don't really know how to pray, do we? Even so-called "professional pray-ers" struggle at times. The words escape us. And the words we do manage to say can seem insufficient. In fact, that's the most common reason people have told me for not visiting or calling on someone—even a relative or a dear friend— when there's a serious illness, a tragedy, a marital separation or some other heartache. They confess, with some embarrassment, that they just didn't know what to say.

The good news I want to tell you today is that, when it comes to praying, we don't have to come up with the right words. Because the Spirit speaks for us, intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words, and says what we wish we could say. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that God's Spirit not only speaks to us, calling us closer to God; but also converses with God on our behalf, saying to God the things we would say if we had the ability and the capacity to say it. The Holy Spirit talks to God for us, with expressions that are too real and honest for human words to describe.

What a blessing that is! The Spirit of God—that part of God which is most intimately and mysteriously God—intervenes for us when we most need it. When we can't find the right words, or we can't find any words at all that express our needs and longings to God, the Spirit finds the words for us.

I read a story once about a poor, uneducated man who lived in a small village. The man went to church every Sunday, and he envied his neighbors who brought their prayer books with them to the worship service. The man yearned to lift up beautiful and articulate prayers to the Lord, but he didn't have the money to buy a prayer book. And even if he did, he couldn't read.

One Sunday the poor man went to church very early, sat alone in a pew in the silent, darkened sanctuary, and began to pray. "A, B, C, D," he said quietly. "E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P . . . Q, R, S, T, U, V . . . W, X, Y, Z."

Then the man lifted his eyes to heaven and said, "Lord, I'm sorry, but I just don't know how to say eloquent and beautiful prayers; so I have prayed all the letters of the alphabet. Please use them and create for me a prayer that is pleasing and acceptable to you."

That's what God's Spirit does. The Spirit arranges the inarticulate things we say and feel, and makes them into powerful and effective prayers to God.

I came across another story to help illustrate what I'm trying to say.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, a group of college

students who had attempted to live out some of King's principles on their campus gathered together to mourn. Some were crying, holding one another. Others shook with outrage. But everyone was struck with numbed, stupefied silence.

Dr. King was dead. His great voice and powerful message of non-violence had been silenced. The students wanted something to be said. They wanted to say something themselves, but none of them were able to speak. Words failed them at that time.

Finally, an elderly preacher, the pastor of a local congregation, a man who had advised, counseled and encouraged some of those students in the past, and who was hurting as badly as the students were during that time of grief, stood up and prayed. His gentle voice prayed for the King family, for King's followers, for the nation, and for those students. He talked to God about the struggle for civil rights for African Americans that Martin Luther King had given his life for, and asked God to help that righteous and just cause move forward with the help of other inspired leaders.

This preacher prayed as someone who knew God personally and had shared many sad and joyful moments with God before that dreadful day. From the perspective of someone listening to it, the prayer wasn't very eloquent, at least by poetic standards. It was far from lyrical or graceful. But it was spoken from the heart, with deep honesty and sincerity. The preacher's prayer spoke to the students who were there listening; and it spoke for those students who, at that very emotional time, didn't have the capability to pray for themselves.

In Romans 8, Paul wrote that something much like the pastor's prayer for those students happens for us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit helps us in our weakness—particularly our weakness in prayer. We don't have to come up with the perfect phrases, or worry about finding the acceptable theological expression, or struggle to say exactly the right thing to satisfy a critical and distant God. Rather, the Spirit helps us to express ourselves. God's very self forms the words of prayer for us that we ourselves are unable to form. The Spirit prays for us.

Often in this life, when we're alone, bereaved or speechless, words fail us. But praise God, the Spirit doesn't fail. Sometimes we don't know how to pray. But, thank God, the Spirit knows how to, and does so on our behalf. So, even as we're groaning and groping for the ability to tell God how it really is with us, and we're struggling to express to God what's truly going on in our souls, the Holy Spirit is already doing the talking for us.

My friends, this morning's good news is, God doesn't demand that we have to be eloquent at prayer before God listens or responds. That would put

us in a difficult spot because, more often than we probably like, when we talk with God, our efforts to be honest and sincere and pray with deep faith and trust fall short of the mark.

But there's no need for despair, because when we pray, the Spirit is there to help us. The Spirit speaks to God for us in deep and powerful ways—ways that we could never pray ourselves. When words escape us, God's Spirit captures them, rearranges them, and uses them on our behalf.

So, may we never hesitate to lift up our prayers to God because we feel inadequate, because we have everything we need, and much more, to pray effectively and be heard.

The Spirit prays for us.

Thanks be to the Lord. Amen.