

The *Book of Common Prayer* says that prayer “is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.” (BCP 856) I want you to hold that as we tend to two of this day’s readings. First, from the sixth verse of the second chapter of Colossians:

*“As therefore you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”*

These words encapsulate for me the whole of the Christian life, and the heart of what prayer is about as a response to God’s goodness and grace. We have received Jesus Christ as a gift. There is a great temptation among liturgical Christians to think that we get Jesus based on how well we do worship or whose hands consecrate the elements. There is a great temptation among moralists to think that we get Jesus by making sure we do good and not evil. There is a great temptation among evangelicals to think we get Jesus based on saying the right words. But *all* of us have received Jesus as a free gift.

We are so accustomed to consumerism that we are tempted to treat this gift as a commodity. So we receive Jesus as we might a Nintendo game or a beanie baby or a Tickle-me-Elmo. These things are all precious for a while. They are all the rage and all of our friends have one and we want to be like all of our friends. But before you know it those “precious” things start to show up at the Church Mouse Fair, priced to sell. Sometimes the church is tempted toward a kind of consumer Christianity that is like that. But on our best days we know that this gift of Jesus is different—it’s the gift of love. It’s more like the gift of friendship or a fine bottle of wine; it gets better over time.

We are free to say with this gift as with any gift, “that’s not what I asked for.” That is, we are free to reject the gift. But we do not and cannot control the gift; we are recipients. The beginning and end of our life in Christ and of our prayer lives is to say “thank you”—not only when all is well, but even in the midst of the struggles and heartaches life brings.

The word “Eucharist” means *thanksgiving* in Greek. It is at the core of our life-together in Christ. So we gather here each week to say “thanks be to God”—for our lives, for these lives, and this bread, and this cup, and this moment, and this day. Faith like that requires intentionality. We gather here (even in the summer months!) not because of guilt or to satisfy an obligation but so that we can bear with one another and support one another and love one another. That is the faith we have been given—a hard faith that challenges us to be transformed and to be part of a community. We enter into that process of transformation by opening ourselves to God and neighbor, and the heart of that is what I would call prayer: with or without words, on our knees or standing tall, in our thoughts and in our actions.

Before we move on to today’s gospel I just want to say one more thing about this first text and that is that the spiritual practice, or discipline, that goes along with this invitation to be “abounding in thanksgiving” is Christian stewardship. When we abound in thanksgiving we cultivate generosity—until we ourselves become givers, as God is a Giver. We give of our time, talents, and treasure. We don’t say with false humility, “I have nothing to give—I am worthless.” That is to deny what God has done and desires to do through us. If we trust the God who has made us in God’s own image then we know that God doesn’t make junk. We give thanks for the gifts we *do* have and try to discern how best to share them with the world. I think all of us know this in our bones because it is how we are made. And yet most, if not all, of us suffer from various degrees of amnesia from time to time.

One antidote to that tendency toward amnesia is to pray the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father...") every time we gather together as the Body of Christ—every time we celebrate Holy Eucharist and every time we gather for Morning Prayer or Compline. It is at the heart of our life together. It is not an easy prayer to live but our familiarity with it can prevent us from hearing just how radical a prayer it is. The goal is to pray it not just on our lips but with our lives. To do so is to be transformed—to be made alive in Christ.

Whatever else it means, the prayer our Lord taught us is about being open to the reality of God's presence here and now. It begins by recognizing God's otherness—God's holiness. We are beloved creatures of God but we are not God; only God is God. So we begin by praying that God's name be hallowed (made holy.) And then we pray for the kingdom of God to come into our midst: here and now. And for us to have eyes to see. We pray for daily bread—not for security but for sustenance, for enough to live this day. We pray that forgiveness become a healing circle in our lives that brings together love of God and of neighbor and with it new Easter life, for as forgiven people we are empowered to forgive others and as people who forgive others we are able by the grace of God to accept God's forgiveness as well, and as we accept that forgiveness we in turn offer that forgiveness to others. It's not a one-way thing. The forgiven become forgivers.

There are two images that we heard in today's gospel reading that go along with the Lord's Prayer. One is about a person who goes to his friend's house at midnight. His friend is in bed already but he is there because the cupboard is bare and another friend, a guest has arrived. The word *companion* comes from two Latin words that literally mean "to bread with." A friend is one with whom we break bread; or share pizza and a beer, or cheese and crackers, or cookies and milk. We eat together with those we care for and if we have nothing in the fridge then we need to knock on our neighbor's door and borrow something so we can set the table.

Now if you knock on my door at midnight looking for something to share with another friend I may be annoyed at being awakened. But if I am truly a friend I'll get over it, and give you what you need. It's what friends do for one another. It's ok if from time to time we inconvenience our friends—that's what makes them friends is that we can get away with it.

The other image Jesus uses is of parent-child: parents want the best for their kids. If the kid asks for fish we give them a fish, not a snake. If they want scrambled eggs we don't give them liver and onions. Now what is not said here but is clearly implied for anyone who has been a parent is that sometimes the answer is no. Candy apples and cotton candy and ice cream all need to be consumed in small doses. But underlying this image is the fundamental point: that God cares for us like a loving mom. God desires our well-being.

Prayer is not about negotiating with God or trying to manipulate or bribe God. "If you do this one thing God then I'll go to church and tithe my salary..." It doesn't work like that. We don't need to convince God to love us because God is already crazy about us. That I think is the point here. God is the good friend at whose door we can knock at midnight; the loving parent who stands ready to help, and awaits us with open arms.

I find that sometimes people who think they are not very good at prayer really are. That doesn't mean any of us are there yet. But in thought and deeds, with or without words, where we see thankfulness, signs of the Kingdom, forgiveness, new life—whenever we respond to the Giver by becoming givers and to the Forgiver by becoming forgivers—we are engaged in prayer. We are responding to the love of God made known in Jesus. Whenever we seek, knock, and ask we are putting first things first—one day at a time. And all the rest begins to fall into place.