

March 9, 2023

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

Recently getting caught talking to myself in the grocery store was laughable and slightly embarrassing, yet also a happy reminder of shopping with our son when he was a toddler, more than 30 years ago. His verbal proficiency today was unimaginable then, when his vocabulary was stalled at three words, with no sign of sentences on the horizon.

Undeterred, I talked to him all the time. This included our trips through the grocery store, when I would narrate our quest for apple juice, Cheerios, and yes, more chicken breasts. It was my human parental instinct to teach him to communicate. Our divine Father God has that instinct, too.

By creating us in his own image and likeness, He endowed us with the desire and ability to communicate. He gave us the uniquely human capacity for language so we can connect with others -- including Him, which happens in prayer.

Prayer is understood most simply as conversation with God, a true but very understated explanation for such an unspeakable blessing and privilege. Prayer is a natural human instinct, as people all over the world, in every age, are moved to lift their hearts, minds and voices to a deity.

And yet, although we may have the innate urge to pray, prayer can seem mystifying or awkward. Not surprisingly, then, when Jesus' disciples saw Him praying, they implored Him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1).

His response was what we now call The Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:2–4). Through this simple prayer, Jesus taught his spiritual children how to approach their heavenly Father with reverence, with the desire for his desires, and with humble dependence on his provision for their daily needs as well as his forgiveness and protection. This 2,000-year-old prayer still makes an ideal conversation starter with God.

By praying it, we absorb and reabsorb things He wants us to know and embrace, as we exercise the privilege of talking directly with God using his own words. This happens whenever we pray using The Lord's Prayer or other words of Holy Scripture.

By reading the Bible as divine revelation instead of merely an ancient book of stories and information, we learn what it means to pray, "thy will be done." As Scripture begins to take root, you will "be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). As we prayerfully read the Bible, we peer into the revealed mind of God. As we do, the Holy Spirit works within us, to give us the mind of Christ in return (1 Corinthians 2:10b–16). Then, as we go through our day, our thoughts stay tethered to God's love, truth, strength, and wisdom.

We can help maintain this connection throughout our day by simple "breath prayer": by praying half of a Bible verse as we inhale deeply, and praying the second half as we exhale fully. As Bishop Robert Barron wrote, "breath prayer, and the feel of it in one's lungs and body, can become second nature, automatic, a constant accompaniment of one's activity and inactivity."

Over time, as we steep our minds and infuse our bodies with God's holy word, our whole life becomes a prayer. We find ourselves living

out the impossible-sounding biblical command to "pray without ceasing", as easily as breathing (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

These weeks of Lent leading up to Easter are an ideal time to start or renew the life-giving practice of continual prayer. Here is a superb, divinely-inspired breath prayer, for starters: "Create in me a clean heart, O God/ and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10).

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux