

NKPC 7/24/2016

Psalm 116:1-7 I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. ² Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. ³ The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by distress and sorrow. ⁴ Then I called on the name of the LORD: "LORD, save me!" ⁵ The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.

⁶ The LORD protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me. ⁷ Return to your rest, my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.

Luke 11:1-13

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." ² He said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, ^[a] hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. ^[b] ³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. ^[c]

And lead us not into temptation. ^[d]" ⁵ Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose

you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I

have no food to offer him.' ⁷ And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't

bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I

can't get up and give you anything.' ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get

up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your

shameless audacity ^[e] he will surely get up and give you as much as you

need. ⁹ "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will

find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks

receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for ^[f] a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

The other night after a meeting here at church, there was a bit of discussion about how the Detroit Tigers were doing in their game that night. The Tigers had just scored a run and we were joking around that our "end of the meeting prayer" was what had helped them to score it. One of our elders commented that he never prayed for his sports teams to win anymore because he knew that there were always lots people praying for a win for the opposing team! As we were walking out of the building, I noted that I have prayed for the players to be able to concentrate and to do their best, and one elder remarked how he had noticed lately that when players scored a run, he had seen many of them point at the sky and to give the credit for the home run back to God. Could it be that many major league baseball players were praying to God for that home run before they even stepped up to the plate?

While none of us here as far as I know are major league baseball players, all of us, as followers of Jesus Christ should be able to consider ourselves major league "prayers". --All of us, who have a relationship with God should be able to have a nice conversation with the supreme being -- the entity who is the reason that we all are gathered as a church. And in order to have a conversation with this existential entity, we need to be convinced that God not only exists, but that God actually can and does communicate with all of God's children. -- And this is, of course, the very first phrase that Jesus taught us in how to pray. - We are not just muttering words to ourselves, but we are having a conversation with the God of the universe, our heavenly father who is both holy and accessible and in a relationship with us. --Now, if when we pray, you personally get no further than the first words, "Our Father" acknowledging that God is your parent, that is fine. You could simply just stop right there! In addressing God in prayer, we have made the first and most important step. We are conceding that God exists and that God is in relationship with us and that God does hear us when we pray! This is actually a very wonderful and remarkable thing. And this sort of access to immediate conversation is something that we frequently take for granted.

In the last few decades, there huge increase in the number of people who now own and use cell phones. Today we don't even think twice about pulling our phone out of our pockets and calling a family member on the other side of the country. We just hit their name and within a few seconds we are in a conversation with our loved one. --But if we think about it, we first have to believe that our loved one is live and exists, and then we need to actually make a phone call to them in order to have a conversation. This is just like prayer. In order to pray, we need to believe that God exists and that we can indeed have a conversation with God and that God hears and will speak with us.

So once you have started a conversation with God, what is it that we should talk about? The modern theologian NT Wright says that the Lord's Prayer is absolutely relevant, not only for the world in which Jesus lived, but also in the world in which we live. Today, much like the first century, we live in a world filled with injustice, hunger, malice and evil. It is no secret that there has always been inequality and oppression of people all around the world by the powerful. --And our youth who participated in their voluntary 30 hour fast can tell you all about the problem of hunger and the famines that still stalk the world today. All that we need to do is read the

American headlines from the last few weeks in order to be reminded of all of the malice and the evil in our world that still need to be overcome. In the face of this ever present injustice, we pray to God about how we can help bring about God's kingdom of justice. In the face of hunger and famine across the world, we pray for God's help for us to provide people with enough bread for today. In the prayer that Jesus taught us, we pray for forgiveness for all people to admit their mistakes and to break out of the cycles of violent revenge and for deliverance from people who are bent on doing things that are entirely evil.ⁱ This is all of the stuff that we are praying against and working against when we pray for God's kingdom to come about here on our very broken and messed up earth.

If you are like me, when I start looking at the extent of the worldwide oppression and evil, praying to God about these sort of things can seem so overwhelming. There are so many broken people and so much hurt in the world; I often don't feel that I have the right words to say to think about all of the root causes and all of the systems and to express the extent of my horror and the sadness about what is happening to people. It all just seems so huge that it boggles my mind. But a couple of years ago, I read a book about prayer by Anne Lamott that helped me to frame my prayers

more simply. Anne believes that almost all of our prayers to God fit into one of three categories that each are defined by a single simple word. She attests that the three most basic prayers are: **HELP. THANKS. or WOW.**

We are either asking for God's help to do something or get through something, or we are thanking God for something we have or something that has happened or else we are simply expressing amazement and awe at something that we heard about or saw, felt or experienced. -- If we think of the majority of our prayers as all being rooted in one of these categories, I often find that it gets easier to pray. If we can start our prayers to God with one of these three words and then simply have a conversation with God about what we are thinking or feeling, our prayers can more easily flow from our hearts and minds and become a more natural experience.

A story is often told about a man who discovered how to simplify his prayers to a conversation with God.

A man's daughter had asked her pastor to come and pray with her father. When the pastor arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The pastor assumed that the old fellow had been informed of his visit.

"I guess you were expecting me," he said.

"No, who are you?"

"I'm the new associate pastor at your church," "When I saw the empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up." The pastor said.

"Oh yeah, the chair," said the bedridden man. "Would you mind closing the door?"

Puzzled, the pastor shut the door.

"I've never told anyone this, not even my daughter," said the man.

"But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At church I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it always went right over my head.."

"I abandoned any attempt at prayer," the old man continued, "until one day about four years ago my best friend said to me, 'Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here's what I suggest. Sit down on a chair, place an empty chair in front of you, and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It's not spooky because he promised, 'I'll be with you always.' Then just speak to him and listen in the same way you're doing with me right now."

"So, I tried it and I've liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I'm careful, though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm."

The pastor was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the old guy to continue on the journey. Then he prayed with him, and returned to the church.

Two days later the daughter called to tell the pastor that her daddy had died that afternoon.

"Did he seem to die in peace?" he asked.

"Yes, when I left the house around two o'clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange, In fact, beyond strange-kind of weird.

Apparently, just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on a chair beside the bed."ⁱⁱ

My friends, the relationship that we have with God through Jesus Christ is not something that exists only on an intellectual level. We can know all sorts of facts about the timeline of when the prophet Isaiah lived

but never talk to God. Prayer, instead of being a surefire way to ensure that the Detroit Tigers will win, is a communication with God that establishes our order and place in the universe. It is an acknowledgement that God is God and we are just a human passing through this world. When we are faced with the crazy injustice, hunger and oppression around us it is a way to ask for God's help, as well as to ask God to forgive us for our own brokenness that contributes to it. When we give thanks to God for all that we have, all that we have been entrusted with in this world, when we are in awe of what God has done and what God is going to do, it is then that we are in a place where we can have a heartfelt real conversation with God through prayer. And it is those conversations with God that give us the strength to get through the hard times. It is those conversations that give us the inspiration and the strength to do whatever it is that we feel called to do.

May we all today open our hearts to the presence of God and learn to pray with our God who loves and cares for us. Amen.

ⁱ Wright, NT. *The Lord & His Prayer*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.heavensinspirations.com/empty-chair.html>

Rev. Karen Fitz La Barge. Copyrighted Material. All Rights Reserved