



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Chutzpah and Hope

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 24, 2022

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 18:20-32; Colossians 2:6-15; Luke 11:1-13

Let us pray.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Those words are so familiar: “Our Father, who art in heaven ...” We know them like the back of our hand. Maybe you learned them as a child. Or maybe they’ve seeped into your consciousness just through sheer repetition. Perhaps you felt moved to join with me as I began to pray those words.

The Lord’s Prayer, the Our Father, the *Pater Noster*. By whatever name it is known, it’s a prayer that transcends religious denominations and national boundaries, prayed by millions of people all over the world from all sorts of traditions and in hundreds of different languages.

The power of the Lord’s Prayer became especially clear to me when I was in seminary and did some training as a hospital chaplain. Many of the patients I saw were Spanish speaking, and because I don’t speak Spanish, I was frustrated by not being able to communicate with them. But I did have a little card with the Lord’s Prayer printed in Spanish. And for those who wished, I could pull out that card and say the prayer with them: “Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo, santificado sea tu Nombre ...” Even with my lousy Spanish, they recognized those familiar words; and as we prayed together in their native language, I could see the calm and relief that came over these patients, who just a moment earlier were consumed with fear and worry.

What is it about the Lord’s Prayer that gives it this power to sustain and comfort? Well, one extraordinary thing about it—something that is so familiar that we may not even think about—is that we address God as children addressing a parent. Our Father puts God on the intimate level of a family member. That’s a pretty audacious move! And in fact, in our Episcopal liturgy, we acknowledge that audacity when we say, “As our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say ...”

The Lord’s Prayer is the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples when they saw him praying and asked him to teach them how to pray. Jesus modeled a prayerful life for them and gave them a prayer to use. Luke’s version, which may be closer in structure to the original than Matthew’s, is pared down to the essentials, and its simplicity reveals its power. We speak of our relationship to God as our parent; we sanctify God’s name; and we ask for our basic needs: bread, forgiveness, and deliverance. That’s it. And this is a community prayer. Give us *our* daily bread. Forgive us *our* sins. Do not bring *us* to the time of trial. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we pray for everyone.

After teaching them this prayer, Jesus tells his disciples something about the character of God, with a story that is sometimes called “The Parable of a Shameless Neighbor.” In this story, a man is caught without anything to offer a guest who shows up at his house in the middle of the night. He runs to his

neighbor and begs for help. The neighbor won't get up because it's midnight, but the man shamelessly persists in banging on the door, until eventually the neighbor gives him what he needs. Jesus knows his disciples would certainly do the same for their neighbor, so how much more will God give to them as God's children.

Does this mean our prayers will always be answered in the way we want? No. Prayer isn't about getting what we want, or figuring out just the right words that will bend God to our will. What Jesus promises instead is the gift of the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit who helps us in our weakness," as Paul wrote, "for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26). When words fail us, the Spirit intercedes.

Prayer is a conversation with God. It's a way to bring our cares, our concerns, and our thanksgivings before God to help us connect with God. And sometimes that conversation leads us to boldly dare to imagine a more just and merciful and loving world for ourselves and for our children.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehood." (1)

For Heschel, as well as for Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders of the civil rights movement, prayer was not just an inwardly-focused spirituality removed from the world. It's a force within the world where we find relationship with God and where we find the support and the inspiration to act.

Scripture tells us that God is waiting for us to start the conversation, like the extraordinary exchange between God and Abraham we hear in our reading from Genesis. Standing before God, Abraham starts negotiating on behalf of the people of Sodom. By all accounts, the people of the doomed city of Sodom don't have a lot going for them, and Abraham should not have much reason to hope that God will listen to his pleas. Nevertheless, Abraham fights for them. And he gets right to the point, insisting that surely there must be some righteous people among the people of Sodom, and for that reason all of them should be spared. Abraham starts bargaining, using God's own nature as a negotiating tactic: "Far be it from you to do such a thing! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" Abraham starts with 50, then 45, then 30 righteous people, and he persists in challenging God until he gets God to agree that just 10 righteous people will redeem them all.

Now that's chutzpah! Chutzpah ... chutzpah and hope.

This remarkable conversation between God and Abraham is also a form of prayer. Abraham intercedes for the people of Sodom with a prayer offered with intention and persistence, with hope and shameless audacity, and a profound faith that God will act according to God's own nature. Abraham's prayer envisions a world that aligns with God's justice, and somehow, miraculously, he changes God's mind.

We may not be able to relate to God as Abraham did, but intercessory prayer is a central part of our common life together here at St. Bart's. Our prayer list has names on it that the clergy review every week. We also have the lay pastoral care team who pray with and care for those who are sick or in need. And every Sunday, during the Prayers of the People, all of us gathered here offer prayers for each other, for ourselves, and for the world. These are intercessory prayers—what former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has described simply as "thinking of something or someone in the presence of God." (2)

In a moment, we will pray the Prayers of the People; and as we do, take a moment to think of those on our prayer list—and your own concerns—as simply being in the presence of God.

Next week, we'll be introducing a new online system for submitting prayer requests through the St. Bart's website. It will be a more streamlined system than we have now, and we hope will be easier to use. And don't worry, you can still always contact a member of the clergy directly with your prayer requests. We'll also be changing the way we move through the list of names that are submitted and read aloud at the 11am service on Sunday. You'll be hearing more details about that next week.

For today, though, we can contemplate how Jesus taught us to pray and what he told us about the nature of the God we are praying to. We can begin to think about how we pray together as a community, how we pray for ourselves, for others, for situations in the world, and how we give thanks to God for the blessings we receive.

And in those times when God seems very far away, when we, for whatever reason, are unable to pray ourselves, we can take comfort in knowing that the prayers of the whole St. Bart's community continue for us.

What do you pray for today? Whether you come to God from a place of fear, or grief, or despair, or anger, or are bursting with gratitude and exaltation; whether you pray in your own words, someone else's words, or no words at all, God hears you.

Bring your prayers to God with chutzpah and hope. Put your needs before God with shameless audacity. Dare to tell God about the just and merciful and loving world you imagine. And with God's help, let's begin to build that world together. As our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." *Amen.*

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- (1) Abraham Joshua Heschel, "On Prayer" in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 263. <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/subversive-prayer-necessary-trouble/>
 - (2) Debra Dean Murphy, "When we can't pray," *Christian Century*, May 13, 2020. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/what-are-we-really-doing-when-all-we-can-do-pray-or-not-even>