

## *A Lesson on Prayer*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, (25 July), 2010.*

Text: Luke 11: 1b “Lord, teach us to pray.”

John Donne’s sermon preached at the funeral of Sr. William Cockayne<sup>1</sup> in 1626, contains a very famous confession about one difficulty with prayer.

I throw myself down in my chamber, and I call in and invite God and his angels thither; and when they are there, I ignore God and his angels for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door; I talk on... sometimes I find that I forgot what I was about, but when I began to forget it, I cannot tell. A memory of yesterday’s pleasures, a fear of tomorrow’s dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine ear, a light in mine eye, an any thing, a nothing, a fancy, a chimera in my brain, troubles me in prayer.

Do you know his problem? I do. So did Jesus’ first disciples. Jesus had been praying and when he finished, one of the disciples asked, “*Lord teach us to pray as John taught his disciples.*”<sup>2</sup> The Lord’s Prayer resulted from that request. We say it at every service—many of us say it frequently during our days, as well. If the Lord’s Prayer is all the praying we do, that will be perfectly adequate. But we pray or try to pray other petitions, sometimes in public, at times in private. We pray over concerns and troubles, as we are instructed in this passage from Luke. We struggle for words, we have difficulty concentrating as Dr. Donne admitted, and we worry that perhaps we shouldn’t have asked for this or that. Afterwards we thrash about thinking we may not have sufficient faith or fret over answers to our prayers we didn’t want. Sometimes we just forget and awake in the night, realizing we have not prayed in several days. Prayer is not easy.

In one of Luke’s famous passages on prayer, he related Jesus’ parable about the persistent widow and the judge.<sup>3</sup> Luke prefaced the story saying Jesus told the parable “*about the need to pray and not to lose heart.*” The judge granted the widow’s request because she wore him down with her persistence and nagging. Jesus reminded his followers that God was more caring than the judge and would be quick to answer our petitions. Then Jesus said, “*Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*” To me this means that persistence in prayer is the

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<sup>1</sup> Donne, John. Preached on Dec. 12, 1626. The sermon may be found online at the following URL: <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?JohnDonne,2259> See page 8.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 11:1.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 18:1-8.

very sign of faith. Clearly we ought to pray. Paul instructed us to ‘*pray without ceasing*.’<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it is not easy to pray. We so often feel inadequate, uncertain, unsure.

I have for you a few lessons on prayer but the most important boils down to learning to get in the right space before we try to pray. You have to put yourself—I’m not sure that is the correct verb—into the right frame of mind before you commune with God. I suspect it is why in our bulletins there is always a prayer before worship. On Sundays we rush from home, irritated at the child or husband who is late, frantically looking for keys, arguing about afternoon plans. When we arrive, how do we center ourselves and get still? We listen to a prelude and we say a prayer. If we can’t think of one, there is one printed in the bulletin. We ask God to come among us in the Call to Worship and Invocation. We responsively read—usually a Psalm—for our opening sentences. All of which is to make us forget some of the distractions that define our lives and focus us onto God. What might God say to us today in a reading, a prayer, sermon, hymn or the sacrament?

We often hear that Christianity is a relationship with a person, with God. I don’t know if that makes sense to everyone. We draw near to God best when we do it the same as we make our approach to other important people in our lives: with respect, consideration, kindness, listening. You cannot love your wife or your husband without appreciating the importance of approach. Love happens in a context that must be tended, cultivated, cared for. When we don’t, we find it does not work, no matter how much we say we want it to work.

Here is the first lesson of prayer: *Don’t start by talking to God*. Get comfortable. Remember you pray with your body, not just words. Try to pray on your knees; find a place alone; bow your head and close your eyes to eliminate visual distractions and as a sign of humility. Then, read a Psalm. As you read it, think about the words and the person who first prayed the Psalm. Consider the sounds of the words and the emotions brought to mind and heart. Next, say the Lord’s Prayer or a written prayer to ease your access into God’s presence. Both the Psalm and the prayer will remind you what you are trying to do and put you in the right soul-space. Then be quiet. Just be silent: *listen*. You might try placing upturned, open hands in your lap, as if you are waiting to receive something, because you are. If things come to mind, don’t fight the thoughts. Just wait. Patience is one of the great spiritual disciplines of a praying life.

After a while remember a promise of Scripture to remind yourself (and God) of that promise. Here are a few: “I am with you always.”<sup>5</sup> Another is, “If God is for us, who can be against us?”<sup>6</sup> Here’s another: “All things work together for good for those who love God.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 1Thessalonians 5:17.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 28:20.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:31.

Remembering and reminding have an ancient pedigree in Christianity and Judaism. Our Jewish cousins remind themselves of the great mercies of God in the Exodus every Passover. We say in our communion ritual, “*Remember* on the night he was betrayed he took bread, blessed it, broke it and said, ‘This is my body, broken for you.’”<sup>8</sup> Reminding God, we remind ourselves of God’s promises and our belief in God. Then and only then as you listen and breathe, you can offer up your burdens to God. Speak not in stilted words and phrases, but tell God what is weighing you down. Of course, God already knows but people who are close still tell one another what concerns they have. Paul calls this ‘bearing one another’s burdens,’<sup>9</sup> and it helps just to have someone listen to you and to know that he or she has heard you. In a newsletter article this month I spoke about bringing our concerns and the people for whom we care into the light of God’s presence. We don’t have to tell God what to do, just bring them into God’s grace. God will do the rest. Just imagine them held in God’s love.

After teaching them his prayer, Jesus told his disciples, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”<sup>10</sup> It is a remarkable thing to believe in a God who cares enough to listen to us. Knowing that God listens to us we also open ourselves to what is bothering us. Putting it into words allows it to come out into the open and there God and we can deal with the issue.

I am a great believer in prayer but it is not easy. Prayer takes discipline and effort to practice. If you are not ready for great prayer, I advise praying the Lord’s Prayer two, three, four or five times a day. (After all, as Jesus introduced that prayer, he told his disciples, “Pray like this...”<sup>11</sup>) Work yourself slowly into spiritual shape. Though it was popular in the sixties to talk about praying on the run, I think like all good relationships our connection to God takes intentionality, time, and more exertion than we think. Like a good marriage, you have to work at it and give it your best. Last, remember Jesus’ words:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.<sup>12</sup>

End.

Lessons on Prayer. DOC

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<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>8</sup> 1Corinthians 11:23-24.

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 6:2.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 11:9.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 11:2.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 11:9-10.