

Epiphany 7: “The light shines in the darkness.” How much more!

(A basic line for an Epiphany sermon on prayer.)

In this season of Epiphany we celebrate the coming of the light, as the Gospel of John begins: “In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4-5). We know “The Lord works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.” One of the great mysteries of life is prayer. Is it a way to tip the scales of the universe in our favor? That seems wrong, but what do we say? Are there dos and don’ts we should know about?

Prayer is everywhere. First, as you know: “There are no atheists in foxholes.” It’s what we do when we’re desperate. In war, sickness, trouble, and loss, when we’re in need, when we’re desperate we pray. And even in crises that are not life and death, like before final exams or a big game, many pray who otherwise never darken a church door. We know that many more people pray than go to church. Prayer in times of crisis is a reflex, a plea for help from a higher power.

Second, almost all religions include prayer, according to their own understanding of God and the universe. Buddhists pray. Muslims pray. Hindus pray. Although religions differ dramatically, most include prayer and understand it in similar ways. Prayer means an invoking of higher power and asking for things and whatever else might be thought to go into a prayer. Generally speaking, prayer includes general petitions and intercessory petitions for individuals.

What then is different about Christian prayer?

It is commanded. Martin Luther writes in his Large Catechism, in the Introduction to the Lord’s Prayer: “It is our duty to pray because God commanded it.” That’s blunt: We should do it because we’re commanded to. Luther even calls prayer the Eleventh Commandment. And he links prayer to the Second Commandment: “Do not take the Lord’s name in vain.” Rather, he says, “We are to praise God and call upon him in every need. For to call upon God is nothing other than to pray” (Large Catechism III/4-6; Tappert 420).

The command to pray is not like a command to walk on hot coals or put a hair-shirt, but it is this directive, as Luther says: “Call on God in every need for to call upon God is nothing other than to pray.”

We don’t know how to do it. What then do we do? How do we do it? Our situation before God is like that of being parents with a toddler who wants something. The child is talking, trying to tell you something, but you can’t make out the words, and then maybe he starts to cry, too, and you’re working as hard as you can to figure out what he is saying. What does he want? What’s wrong? And the child, through tears, is blurting out what he wants, but between the tears and the words it is hard to understand what he’s saying. The parents do figure it out and are so happy to meet the child’s needs. The parents rejoice! Their child is learning to communicate.

When we pray, we are like toddlers crying for what we want but can’t articulate properly or are even confused ourselves, stumbling in the darkness. We don’t know how to pray as we ought. And truth be told, there is no right way, are no right words; we don’t have to worry about our words. Whatever words we use will do. We don’t have to have hands folded or in any particular position. We do not have

to be kneeling or sitting. One can be lying down, standing, walking, or running. There are no set rules one ought to follow. Prayer is, as I Peter 5:7 states: "Casting all your cares on him for he cares for you."

A recent obituary in the *Wall Street Journal* for an elderly banker concludes as follows: "In his later years, he did a three-minute plank exercise each morning, propping himself up on his elbows and toes while singing 'Abide With Me,' reciting the Lord's Prayer, and praying for loved ones."

Unconventional, to be sure. But he did what mattered: Casting all his cares on the Lord.

A mother, heartbroken over her daughter's brain tumor, was told to pray for strength and wisdom. "All well and good," she said, but added, she also wanted "to pray for a miracle." Is that O.K. to do, she asked? Yes, prayer is about "casting all our cares on him for he cares for you" (I Peter 5:7).

We pray for others and then wonder: If more people (prayer chain) pray or, more time (pray vigil) is given for prayer, can we intensify the power of prayer? If that were so, then prayer would be a kind of works-righteousness. A means by which we achieve goodness. A way of making ourselves little gods.

To the contrary, the Lord runs the universe, he knows our needs before we ask. And he works in mysterious ways, also through prayer, his wonders to perform.

The effectiveness of prayer is not measured by visible results or success. Luther spoke of the Christian life as a joyful exchange: Christ takes our sin and gives us his righteousness (2 Cor 5:21). This joyful exchange does not mean we should expect success, miracles, and visible transformation. As Luther said, in the life-long battle with the Devil there is no rest, no peace, and no visible success. The Christian life is hidden to the human eye, just as the church is hidden, and the Lord himself is hidden.

The Holy Spirit intercedes. The key to prayer is found in Romans 8:26-27 where Paul writes: "We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the **Holy Spirit intercedes for us** with sighs too deep for words." Sometimes words escape us. Or we don't even know where to begin. Or in times of trouble we may be so distraught we can't find the right words at all. We babble. We sigh. We utter syllables like "wow," in lieu of the right words. Are we failures at prayer? No, because the Lord helps us in our weakness. The Holy Spirit takes our babbling and interprets it. The Holy Spirit knows the mind of God and how the Lord is able to work in our lives in ways we cannot see. As we know, the Lord works in mysterious ways, even in our prayers, his wonders to perform.

The Gospel of John begins with the coming of the light in the darkness. In the Apostles' Creed we confess that Jesus "was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell." He descended into the darkness and defeated sin, and death, and the devil. But the Lord raised him from the dead, raised him to be the light in our darkness and to save us to live forever in his kingdom where evil, sin, and death are no more.

Christian prayer is different because the Father to whom we pray – with the Son, through the Holy Spirit – has conquered the darkness. We are his. Therefore who is to condemn us? Paul writes in Romans 8:34: "Is it **Christ Jesus**, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is **at the right hand of God**, who indeed **intercedes for us**?" At the right hand of God is our advocate, Christ Jesus himself, who is continuously interceding for us with the Father, and that makes all the difference.

It is not up to us to do it right; we have an advocate; the Holy Spirit is interceding on our behalf. The Holy Spirit takes our babbling, our broken words and thoughts and translates them to the Father.

How much more will your heavenly Father give to those who ask him?

The big problem is little faith. Our god is too small. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? **The Lord is the everlasting God**, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not grow faint or weary; his understanding is unsearchable" (Isa 40:28; Rom 11:33). The promises of God are guaranteed by what he has done in the cross and resurrection.

The Lord works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform. In the Bible a question that is asked repeatedly of weak sinners like you and me is: "How much more?!" For example:

- Matthew 7:7-11 reads: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you What man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? Ask and you will receive. If you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more** will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?"
- In Luke 18 a widow came persistently to a judge asking: Vindicate me, vindicate me! Finally the judge relents and vindicates her. And the point of this story comes in verses 7-8: "Will not God **vindicate** his elect who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, **he will vindicate them speedily.**" Again, the question is: **How much more** will the Lord do?!"
- In Romans 8:31-33 Paul writes that in the mystery of good and evil in the world, we know that in everything God works for good, with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. Paul then asks: "What then shall we say to this: If God is for us, who is against us? **He who did not spare his own son** but gave him up for us all, **will he not also give us** all [good] things with him?" In other words: **How much more** will the Lord do for his people?

Have you noticed, the light is coming? "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14). Your Father in heaven. His promises can be counted on. His Word is true. If you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more** will your Father who is in heaven give good things to you and me, his children?