

Teach Us To Pray

By Keith E Gatling

Sermon for July 29, 2007

Lessons for Pentecost 9, Lectionary 17 in Year C

Genesis 18:20-32

Psalm 138

Colossians 2:6-15

Luke 11:1-13

The disciples said to Jesus, "Teach us to pray."

I'll be honest with you, I hate praying. Well, not really. I pray all the time. I hate public praying. I live in dread of those moments when someone asks me to pray. And it's not even the times when I'm at least given a chance to prepare something that I hate. That I can do. It's when people ask me, on the spur of the moment, to come up with something. That's what I dread. Because I'm not good at it at all.

Or am I?

"Baruch ata Adonai, elohim elohenu...Blessed are you oh Lord God, king of the universe..." thus begins many of the classic Jewish prayers. But when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he taught them something different. He taught them to say, "Our Father..."

At least that's how it's been translated into English for these many centuries. But you've probably heard many times by now that the original Aramaic term is "Abba," and "Abba" isn't quite as formal as we've translated it. It's really more equivalent to "dad", "daddy", or "papa." It's a very familiar and intimate term.

By teaching us, and the disciples, to say "Abba," Jesus changes the relationship between us and God from one of distant and fearful respect to one of loving intimacy. He's having us say the equivalent of "Dad...can I have the keys to the car." Those of us who have kids know that when one of them comes to us with phrases like, "Oh good and gracious parent of mine..." we're about to be buttered up for something. Is it possible that God feels the same way when we approach him with phrases like "king of the universe?"

So Jesus teaches us to pray as if we're talking to a parent that we know and love. He teaches us to pray as if we're having a regular conversation. This I'm good at, and have been good at for years - at home.

My mealtime prayers began with the childhood classic:

God is great, God is good.

And we thank him for our food.

This was a great first prayer for a kid to learn. You didn't really have to think too hard about it, but you knew that the point was to thank God for what you had.

But by about 4th or 5th grade it began to feel a little childish. I wanted something else, but I wasn't quite ready for the one my parents used:

Lord, we thank thee for the
nourishment we are about to receive
for our bodies. For Christ's sake.

While the first prayer seemed to childish, the second seemed too grown up. I needed something in-between. Then one day my sister brought home a new prayer from Vacation Bible School:

We fold our hands,
We bow our heads.
To thank thee, God,
For this good food.

OK, so it was just a few steps above "God is great, God is good," but it was one that I wouldn't feel embarrassed saying in public, and what's more, it was different. It wasn't the same old, same old that every other kid was using.

This remained my mealtime prayer until well into college, at which point I decided that I needed something different again. But what? The one my parents used still wasn't quite my style, and probably never would be.

I had been fascinated by Judaism ever since Nancy Ellen Winograd had been one of my best friends in grade school, so when, in a little diner near Cortland during my freshman year at SU, I saw placemats with Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish mealtime prayers printed on them, I became acquainted with one of the many prayers

that begin "Baruch ata, adonai, elohim elohenu..."

I didn't use it for long, and I definitely didn't use it in Hebrew, because I didn't want to be seen as a show-off.

By the way, one of my most commonly used, non-mealtime prayers during my undergrad and grad school years was what I'll call the "busy signal" prayer. This is a prayer that just about every guy knows, and is invoked whenever you call a girl for the first time to ask her out. It goes:

Dear God. Please let the line be busy
so she can't turn me down.

Talk about low self-esteem. I specifically remember offering this prayer when I called Cheryl for the first time 21 years ago. And my shock when she immediately agreed to go out with me. But that's another story.

Anyway, somewhere along the line my whole pattern of praying changed from the rote memorization style to the more intimate conversational style. And I might have the actor Jimmy Stewart to thank for that.

In the 1965 movie "Shenandoah," his character, Charlie Anderson, offers the following prayer at dinner:

Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, and harvested it. We cooked the harvest. It wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eating it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you Lord just the same for the food we're about to eat.

Wow! Talk about blunt. And honest. There's no buttering up here. No fancy turns of phrase that sound great in public. He figures that God knows how he feels, and there's no sense in pretending otherwise when he prays. What a concept. Our mealtime prayers haven't been the same since. Mine are likely to go along the lines of:

Dear God, thank you for this food, and for our family and friends. There are a lot of stupid and selfish people in this world, who are making life miserable for everyone else. Could you please do something about that? And while you're at it, please do something about our neighbor who hates us.
Thanks.

And it gets better. Despite the fact that they often get along like oil, water, and a flame-thrower, Sofie loves her big sister Devra. And so one night, when it was my turn to pray, I started out as usual with, "Dear God, thank you for this food, and for our friends and family," when Sofie looks up and shouts, "and for pain in the butt!"

Yes, she is truly thankful for her pain in the butt sister, and wants God to know that.

But what works at home often doesn't work in public. At the very least, things that are perfectly acceptable and that people expect you to do at home aren't always expected and accepted in public. For example, you all expect Cheryl and I to kiss each other at the passing of the peace. But anything else, no matter how appropriate it may be in private, and we'd get a little talking to - and quite a bit of talking about.

So it is with public prayer. Despite the fact that Jesus taught us to say "Dad..." and to just pray as if we were having a regular conversation, we still tend to feel more comfortable with a more formal format in public prayer. We still like to hear things like "Gracious Father" or "Heavenly Father," and we like the rest of the words to sound more polished.

Except for me. When I write the prayers, I tend to look at what's in our various liturgical resources, and the rewrite them so that they sound like something that this average everyday guy might say, rather than the fancy schmancy theological treatises that they often sound like. I try to remember that prayer isn't always a deadly serious proposition, but is often one of joy for being able to converse with God in such an intimate fashion.

But as I said before, sometimes what works at home doesn't work so well in public, and sometimes that gets me in trouble.

I've suffered from horrible spring allergies ever since I was about eight years old. Growing up in a tree-lined community in North Jersey, spring was total agony for me. The sneezing and runny nose were bad enough, but even worse were the eyes that itched horribly during the day and stuck together when I first woke up in the morning. Claritin hadn't been invented yet, so I simply had to suffer for four to six weeks, getting my only relief from the boric acid solution I'd rinse out my eyes with almost every day.

I've largely grown out of the worst effects of my spring allergies over the years, while recently acquiring a new one to cats, but spring is still no picnic for me.

Probably the worst part is Easter. Every year, I forget until I walk in the door and get hit by the great wall of pollen, that this is the day when there will be enough flowers around the altar to choke a moose - especially if that moose has hay fever.

This Easter, however, I remembered, and took a 24-hour Claritin the night before. In addition, Cheryl and I were scheduled to assist, and when I wrote the prayers for the day, I put in a special petition for those who suffered from hay fever.

Cheryl, who had been planning to read the prayers, took one look at that line, and decided that while it made perfect sense coming from me, she wasn't doing it. She showed it to Pastor Paul to get his opinion, and he reportedly rolled his eyes while muttering something about how weird Keith is. Finally I said, "Fine. If you're uncomfortable with it, you chant, I'll do the prayers." As far as I was concerned, this prayer was being heard, because surely I wasn't the only person with this problem.

The point came in the service for the prayers, and when I got to the petition about the beautiful flowers around the altar and the people who suffered from hay fever, I paused a little bit - and heard a few chuckles. This told me that I was right. There were people out there who identified with what I had just said, and appreciated being remembered in the prayers.

But not everyone appreciated it.

I got a few complaints over the next week about that prayer. About how it wasn't worshipful enough, how it broke the atmosphere of the service by making people laugh, and how it was, well - inappropriate.

I thought about this for a few days. What was inappropriate about this petition? It was after all, a valid concern. If it was about the laughter it produced, I thought of the sense of humor God has - who after hearing Sarah laugh when she and Abraham are informed that she'll become pregnant in her old age, tells them to name the child Isaac, which is Hebrew for "laughter." And yet, I'd offered petitions before which elicited chuckles from the congregation. I remember one that I found in another liturgical resource that had us thanking God for all those who show hospitality in the church, and especially those who make the coffee. I got no complaints about that, but then again, I guess coffee is an important thing to Lutherans. Someone once called it the third sacrament. If you don't believe me, Google "Lutheran", "coffee", and "third sacrament." You'll get over 200 hits.

Did I go for the laugh when I wrote that prayer? As comedian Dick Martin might have said 40 years ago, you bet your sweet bippie I did. But that's because I've come to believe that laughter is an important part of prayer. And that prayer is too important to take so seriously that all the joy is wrung out of it.

But perhaps in going for that chuckle, I had just hit the border of that old public prayer/private prayer thing. Even I know enough to understand that there are some things you just don't do in public prayer. You're not likely to hear a petition from me thanking God for the teacher down the hall who makes my day every time she walks by - even though I say it privately every day. Some prayers are just a matter of what my

students would call TMI: too much information.

I also understand that some prayers that are perfectly acceptable and appropriate at home, can be invasions of someone's privacy when offered in public. The colleague being treated for skin cancer, the friend who's having marital problems, and the student with an eating disorder may not appreciate you going public with their issues if they haven't already done it.

Perhaps it was social expectation. What you consider appropriate depends a lot on what you grew up with and what else you've seen and are used to. It depends on whether you're from a formal "high church" or an informal "low church" background. And this determines whether you're used to hearing, "Gracious heavenly father" or "Dad..." In a place where so many of us come from different backgrounds, this will always be a tough one to navigate, but it seems that despite what Jesus taught us, a lot of us still feel more comfortable with the more formal, and it takes us a lot of work to feel at home with the more intimate style that Jesus tries to teach us.

I also remembered a line from a prayer from my childhood in the Episcopal Church, which says that we come to God "not as we ought, but as we are able." This told me that there's no point in trying to pretend to be something that we're not when we approach God, because he knows better. As Charlie Anderson did in "Shenandoah," we might as well just honestly be ourselves.

And yet, maybe in public it's possible to be just a bit too honestly ourselves.

I thought about all of these issues as I carefully responded to the people who complained, and explained why I believed

that my "hay fever petition" was perfectly appropriate.

But what about the prayers that are truly inappropriate, in any venue, public or private? I think we all know that despite that awful line in Psalm 137 (and today's psalm is number 138, so we missed it by a hair) that mentions dashing the heads of the enemies babies against the rocks, we shouldn't pray for harm to come to anyone. And yet, how often do we pray for someone to "get theirs," or even worse, that someone should burn in Hell?

A friend of mine once said that she found it sadly ironic that Christians, who gave the world the concept of Hell as a place to suffer for your sins, should hope that anyone actually ended up there. Warning people about the possibility is one thing, but praying that they end up there is something completely different - and inappropriate.

There's one other type of prayer that's inappropriate. It's one that we do probably all the time without thinking about how inappropriate it is, and one that I didn't really think about until CS Lewis pointed it out to me. It's what I'll call the "siren prayer."

This is the prayer that we all instinctively say when we hear a siren and then see some sort of emergency vehicle go by. We all quickly say a prayer along the lines of "Please don't let it be someone I know." But if you think about it, what a prayer like this is really saying is "Please let it be someone else," and that's obviously inappropriate.

If my memory of what Lewis said serves me clearly, the only thing we're really allowed to pray for when we hear those

sirens is that they get there in time to resolve the situation with the least amount of harm to anyone.

Similarly, when we hear of a plane crash, train wreck, or some other sort of accident, it's inappropriate to pray that it wasn't a vehicle that someone we know was on - especially if they were traveling that day - but we can pray that no one had any serious injuries.

Despite the fact that I knew a few students who were in London at the time, and that I worked at SU, I was truly fortunate that I knew none, absolutely none, of the students killed when Flight 103 went down over Lockerbie 19 years ago. Oh sure, I probably knew people who knew people, but I didn't directly know any of the people on that flight. What are the odds of that?

When I first heard about what happened, I remember immediately thinking of the one or two students I knew who were over there, and wondering if they were on that flight, but I honestly can't remember if I said the prayer that CS Lewis says we mustn't.

This is a tough one to get around because it's second nature to us to look out for and try to protect those we know and love first and the rest of the world second. It might even be OK to do this, but what we can't and must not do is look to protect those we love by putting someone who we don't know, but is equally loved by someone else in their place.

And yet, this whole CS Lewis thing can easily make you crazy if you think about it too much.

A few weeks ago, on my way home from the mall, I saw a homeless guy standing at the corner just before the entrance to

route 81, holding up a sign that said, "Can you help me?" Well, I didn't have one of our "kits of caring" in the van at the time, but I figured I could help anyway. It wouldn't take me long at all to make a quick detour to Wendy's to pick up a combo meal for him.

When I got back to that corner, he wasn't there. "Oh no!" I thought. I must've just missed him. Maybe he went off for a potty break somewhere and would be right back (can you tell I have a small kid around the house?). So I circled around one more time, hoping to see him again.

And that's when CS Lewis kicked in with a vengeance. All of a sudden a little voice said to me that maybe he wasn't there because someone else had already gotten him something, and my hoping that he was still there was equivalent to saying that I hoped that no one else had helped him out yet.

At that point my head started to hurt and I decided that I definitely spend too much time thinking about some things. And that it's possible to overdo even the venerable CS Lewis.

So I headed home with the combo meal. I drank the Coke in the van, shared the fries with Sofie when I got home, and gave Cheryl the burger to take to work with her that night.

But having said all this, now it's time to try to tie this up.

How should we pray? Jesus gives us the example of saying "Dad..." instead of "Gracious Father" or "King of the Universe." But I think that the point here is not to give us a new rule by saying "Thou shalt say 'dad'," but to make us feel comfortable with approaching God.

I first met Ruth Adams when I was 31 years old. A grownup. So I knew her then and know her now as just Ruth. And yet, there are people who are exactly my age, who met her 15 years earlier as Mrs Adams, and will feel uncomfortable ever calling her anything else.

Similarly, I was looking through an old MPH yearbook, and saw that one of my colleagues, who isn't that much older than me, started teaching there while Cheryl was still in high school. I chuckled at the idea that had Cheryl gone to MPH as a kid, instead of Fabius-Pompey, she would've spent many years calling our friend Laurie

"Mrs Hadlick," and that it probably would've taken her a long time to feel comfortable calling her by her first name.

So if you feel more comfortable approaching God with something a little more formal, and with a more formal style of prayer, then by all means do it. After all, it's the fact that you're approaching him at all that really matters.

And I still think we should thank God for the people who make the coffee.

This is most certainly true.