

Belonging

Psalm 30:1-8; Luke 11:1-13

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Several years ago, a family was being interviewed on *60 Minutes*. There was a religiously devout mother in her thirties, a somewhat older and painfully shy father, and their ten-year-old daughter bound to a wheelchair by spina bifida. Every single year of their child's life, this family made the pilgrimage to Lourdes in France, a place where physical healing is said to occur.

The interviewer, Ed Bradley, was giving the family a hard time for being so gullible. At one point he turned to the little girl and asked, "When you pray, what do you pray for?" She replied, "I pray that my father won't be so shy. It makes him terribly lonely." Well, that stopped Bradley for a moment, but then he pressed on—questioning the family's priorities and wisdom, saying to the mother that they spend thousands of dollars every year going to Lourdes and still they have had no miracle.

But looking at her loving daughter, the mother answered, "Oh, Mr. Bradley, don't you get it? We already have our miracle."¹

When you pray, what do you pray for? How do you pray? *If* you pray, what are you looking for? What do you *expect*, when you pray?

In the *60 Minutes* interview Ed Bradley—and probably we—were sharing a fixed set of expectations: that the girl would be able to walk or there would be no "miracle." As one commentator observed of this scene: "What was missed was the miracle of a daughter's growing love – 'I pray for my father.'" He missed the miracle of a family held together in faith. He missed the miracle of joy growing in soil that should not, by all rights, sustain joy. "God does not work in the world in ways we expect, because God's mercy breaks the bounds of our narrow imaginations."²

Expectations and blessings. Miracles and faith. Narrow imaginations and holy mystery. The disciples struggled with these same tensions. Finally, as they were going around with Jesus, it got to be too much for them to bear any longer. They had watched Jesus act and heal and teach and preach and move about among the people. And they watched him as he prayed. Finally, they asked him (adding a little peer pressure for good measure): "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

Rarely, if ever, is Jesus asked to teach them something so specific. More important, rarely does Jesus respond by saying: "Do it like this...."

Jesus isn't big on operating instructions. Jesus was, if you will, the Ikea of his time: You want to assemble this complex thing? Here's a half sheet of abstract drawings. I'm sure you'll do fine. There are so many times when Jesus is asked—begged—for an equation, for a formula. Time and time again, he re-sists. But not here. "Pray like this...."

And no wonder! Is God a God of mystery or the loving presence, ready to meet our needs? Do we ask God on behalf of others, or can we ask for ourselves, or should we ask at all? Does God answer prayer? How does God answer prayer? Will we know if God answers prayer? What is "off limits" in praying to God?

"Pray like this...." Of course, as with so many times with Jesus, this "formula" is

not exactly what it seems.

“Our Father—most tender, intimate one of love and care—
—in heaven—holy is your name.”

Which is it? The reachable, accessible, tender parent—or the one who is in heaven, which is decidedly *not* where we are? We want answers to our questions, and Jesus seems to launch us into more mystery—into even deeper paradox.

The word “paradox” comes from two Greek words—*para* and *doxa*—meaning “beyond” and “opinion.” It points to a reality that goes beyond our typical, simple, linear thought. Nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard taught that when thought is driven to its limits, when we attempt to discover what thought cannot rationally comprehend, we are left with the absurd, which can be expressed only in paradox and is the road to faith.

A late Archbishop of Canterbury said that the doors of the church ought never to be so low that we must leave our heads outside when we enter.

This doesn’t mean that faith is necessarily a reasonable matter. Sometimes our minds cannot comprehend what is happening. This same archbishop once preached a sermon on the end of the world. Following the service, a woman greeted him at the door and said, “Your Grace, I so much enjoyed that sermon,” to which he responded, “But Madam, you weren’t supposed to enjoy it.”³

There is mystery and paradox at the heart of faith. And far from “solving” that for us with this prayer, Jesus seems to embrace it and move us deeper into the mystery of experiencing God.

Frankly, I think “mystery” is something we think we’ll like, but secretly despise. We want the equation. We think we need the formula. But Jesus seems to be reminding us that there is great danger in reducing God—or at least our contemplation of God—to manageable size. We seem to want God presented in a neat, packaged way: squared at the corners, neatly folded, everything doable—or never even imagined—everything careful and “verified,” everything “possible,” no stretching of the mind, no surplus of meaning. It’s almost as if we yearn to talk about God as if we’ve been on the tour and walked all around God, taking pictures.⁴

Jesus knew this was our yearning, our false hope, and Jesus says, “Pray like this....” Far from reducing God to manageable size, Jesus offered paradox, and expansive contemplation, and mystery.

That, of course, is not our only problem with the Lord’s Prayer. It is the *Lord’s* Prayer. It’s everywhere. We pray it in church every Sunday. We pray it at weddings and funerals. It’s uttered in prisons, in hospitals, and by football teams in Texas.

This is also a paradox—it’s a two-sided proposition. I think we can agree that something recited in a mindlessly rote way Sunday after Sunday, occasion after occasion—oh, here comes the Lord’s Prayer again—is empty and depleting. At the same time, nothing is more nurturing of our souls, nothing can be more empowering of faith—than habit. While it is helpful to adjust our focus from time to time to keep our imagination alive, we can’t neglect the discipline of habit.

In Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, he casts our words from Luke’s version of the prayer:

- ² So (Jesus) said, “When you pray, say,
 Father, Reveal who you are.
 Set the world right.
³ Keep us alive with three square meals.
⁴ Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
 Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.” ⁵

No matter how we say it, whatever words we use, the spiritual discipline and nourishment of habit remains.

The father of cellist Yo-Yo Ma spent World War II in Paris, where he lived alone in a garret throughout the German occupation. In order to restore sanity to his world, he would memorize violin pieces by Bach during the day and then at night, during blackout, he would play them alone in the dark. The sounds made by the reverberating strings held out the promise of order and hope and beauty. Later, his son, Yo-Yo, took up the father’s advice to play a Bach suite from memory every night before going to bed. Yo-Yo Ma says, “This isn’t practicing; it’s contemplating. You’re alone with your soul.”⁶

The truth about our lives is that when it gets deep and hard, and when we are pressed from every side, we simply cannot make up our faith on the fly. We need a reservoir of hope and life and discipline and practice upon which to call when the time is urgent.

It shouldn’t be surprising to hear about Jimmie G. Jimmie G was one of the patients highlighted in neurologist Oliver Sack’s book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. Jimmie G. was a former sailor who for several decades suffered from a brain disease that involved severe amnesia. Jimmie lost three decades of memory and could not retain isolated items in his mind for more than a fleeting second. Tom Long documents and discusses part of this material in his book, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*:

“Do you think he has a soul?” Sacks asked the nuns who cared for him in the nursing facility where he lived.

The nuns were *outraged* by the question. “Watch Jimmie in chapel and judge for yourself,” they said.

Sacks went to observe Jimmie in chapel and reported on what he saw: “I was moved, profoundly moved—and impressed, because I saw here an intensity and steadiness of attention and concentration that I had never seen in him or thought him capable of.

“I watched him kneel and take the Sacrament on his tongue and could not doubt the fullness and totality of Communion, the perfect alignment of his spirit and the spirit of the Mass. Fully, intensely, quietly, with concentration and attention, he entered and partook of Holy Communion. He was wholly held, absorbed by a feeling. There was no forgetting—no amnesia then—nor did it seem possible that there could be, for he was no longer at the mercy of a faulty and fallible mechanism—that of meaningless sequences and memory traces—but he was absorbed in an act—an act of his whole being, which carried feeling and meaning in an organic continuity and unity—so seamless it could not permit any break. He was no longer fluttering, restless,

bored, and lost, but deeply attentive to the beauty and the soul of the world.”⁷

Through his act, he belonged.

Just as the mystery of God invites us, not to some creed or doctrine, to experience God, so, too, the discipline of saying these words, praying this prayer—over and over and over—invites us not to some dull, rote exercise, but to an act of love, a daily act of faith and hope. At its best—at our best—we become the prayer we are praying:

God—both intimate and wholly other—reveal who you are.

Set the world right.

Keep us alive with three square meals.

Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.

Keep us safe from ourselves and evil....

At its best—at our best—we move into the world to act out the prayer we are praying, and in so doing, in a world where we can feel so lost, so hurt or confused, so separated, we belong. We belong to God.

Anne Lamott took her two-year-old son to Lake Tahoe where they stayed in a condominium by the lake. That area around Reno is such a hotbed of gambling that all the rooms are equipped with those curtains and shades that block out every speck of light so you can stay up all night in the casinos and then sleep all morning. One afternoon she put the baby to bed in his playpen in one of those rooms, in the pitch dark, and went to do some work. A few minutes later she heard her baby knocking on the door from inside the room. She got up, knowing he’d crawled out of his playpen. She went to put him down again, but when she got to the door, she found he’d locked it.

He had somehow managed to push the little button on the doorknob. He was calling to her, “Mommy, Mommy,” and Anne was saying to him, “Jiggle the door knob, darling.” Of course he couldn’t even see the knob to know what she was talking about. After a moment, it became clear to him that his mother could not open the door, and panic set in. He began sobbing. So his mother ran around like crazy trying everything, trying to get the door to work, calling the rental agency where she left a message, calling the manager where she left another message, and running back to check her son every minute or so. And there, in this dark, locked room was her terrified little child.

Finally she did the only thing she could, which was to slide her fingers underneath the door, where there were a few centimeters of space. She kept telling him over and over to bend down and find her fingers. And somehow he did.

So they stayed like that for a really long time, connected, on the floor, him holding her fingers in the dark, and slowly feeling connected, feeling her love, feeling her presence and her care.⁸

I think prayer may well feel to you or me like being a two-year-old in the dark. God is our mother, and I am not old enough to speak cogent phrases yet, even in the midst of such panic. She could break down the door if that struck her as being the best way, but instead, via my prayers and my church and my awkward faith, I can reach just far enough to hold onto her fingers underneath the door. How can that be enough? It is enough.

They had watched Jesus teach and preach and heal and cast out demons and touch the untouchable and love the unlovable. Where did that come from? How did he do it?

How did he live it? In their desperation, they came to him and said, “Teach us how to pray.” Jesus didn’t give them an equation, and he didn’t offer them a formula. He didn’t solve their problems, or make everything clear.

God—Reveal who you are.
Set the world right.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the devil....

Jesus offered them mystery that drove them deeper. He offered them a call to act out God’s love no matter how lost they felt. He offered them a hand squeezed under a locked door—the most unlikely embrace that met every need they ever had.

Notes

1 Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

2 Tom Long, *Testimony* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

3 Thanks to a devotional written by the Rev. Derek Starr Redwine, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Akron, Ohio, for the basis of this material.

4 This language was used by Fred Craddock in a sermon at the Festival of Homiletics in Nashville in May, 2007.

5 Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Nav Press Publishing Group, 1996).

6 As told by Philip Yancey in *First Things* (firstthings.com), February 2009.

7 As told in Tom Long’s *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 24.

8 Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions*, 88-89.