

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

The story is told that Simon Wiesenthal, the famous Nazi-hunter, once spoke at a conference of European rabbis in Bratislava, Slovakia. After the rabbis presented the 91-year-old Wiesenthal with an award, Wiesenthal, visibly moved, told them the following story<sup>1</sup>:

“It was in Mauthausen, shortly after liberation. The camp was visited by Rabbi Eliezer Silver, head of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of North America, on a mission to offer comfort to the survivors. Rabbi Silver also organized a special service, and he invited Wiesenthal to join the other survivors in prayer. Wiesenthal declined, and explained why.

“In the camp, Wiesenthal said to Rabbi Silver, “there was one religious man who somehow managed to smuggle in a *siddur* (that is, a prayer book). At first I greatly admired the man for his courage—that he’d risked his life in order to bring the *siddur* in. But the next day I realized, to my horror, that this man was ‘renting out’ this *siddur* to people in exchange for food. People were giving him their last piece of bread for a few minutes with the prayer book. This man, who was very thin and emaciated when the whole thing started, was soon eating so much that he died before everyone else—his system couldn’t handle it. Wiesenthal explained: ‘If this is how religious Jews behave, I’m not going to have anything to do with a prayer book.’

As Wiesenthal turned to walk away, Rabbi Silver touched him on the shoulder and gently said in Yiddish, ‘*Du dummer*’ (that is, *you silly man*). Why do you look at the Jew who used his *siddur* to take food out of starving people’s mouths? Why don’t you look at the many Jews who gave up their last piece of bread in order to be able to use a *siddur*? That’s faith. That’s the true power of the *siddur*.’ Rabbi Silver then embraced him. ‘I went to the service the next day,’ said Wiesenthal.

This story should bring some relief and affirmation to us Episcopalians, who are sometimes criticized for being unable to pray without our prayer books. It reminds us that Jewish folks, as well as those in some other faith traditions, also use a prayer book, and there is nothing wrong with that. Episcopalians who use the *Book of Common Prayer* know that it is full of scripture, offers prayers for situations in which we often cannot find words, and can be the basis for the formation of lifelong spiritual practices. If you haven’t browsed through the Prayer Book lately, I encourage you to do so. If you don’t have a prayer book, please tell me. I’ll get you one.

“Lord, teach us to pray.” The gift of prayer is just that—a gift. Not all of us are born knowing how to form the words, to open up the communication that enables relationship with the incarnate God. Many of us, especially us older folks, were exposed to the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, not only in church but in other arenas and situations where it isn’t heard today. Its form and structure are found in our heart of hearts, ready to be pulled out when needed. The language we use in the Lord’s Prayer differs from one translation to another, even in our Prayer Book. You’ll see today that the language of Luke’s prayer is different from the language of Matthew’s prayer; but the elements are present in both versions. Each acknowledges God’s holiness in the words ‘hallowed be your name,’ each acknowledges a desire for God’s kingdom to come near, each asks God’s provision for our needs and protection from evil, and each asks God’s forgiveness of our sins “as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Like the confessional prayers we use each Sunday, the Lord’s Prayer is a corporate prayer; unless we change “our Father” to “my father,” and “us” and “our” to “me” and “my.” That doesn’t mean we

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<sup>1</sup> Synthesis, Year C, Proper 12, Postscript, July 28, 2013.

can't use it individually in the way it was taught to us, but we might consider making it more personal, more individual. In doing so, we are also making our relationship with God more personal and more individual, and that's important.

Although I was raised by Christian parents and worshipped in church each Sunday, the only prayer I remember hearing in our home was the table blessing before dinner each night; maybe also the nighttime prayers we teach our little children, who outgrow them all too quickly. I grew up understanding myself to be one among many members of the body of believers who follow Christ as part of this communion of Christians that we call the Church. That's exactly what I was, and what I still am. But somehow I missed knowing that Christ loves me because I am me, all by myself, not just because I was and am a member of the Body of Christ. I was in my thirties before I came to the understanding that Jesus loves me because I am a child of God. That changed my life drastically, giving it meaning and giving me a desire to communicate with my Creator. I learned that my words are not nearly as important as what is in my heart; and I also learned in very distinct ways that God wants to hear from me just as much as I want to speak to God and hear from God, even when I don't know what to say or how to say it, or when and how to listen for God's voice.

That's what Jesus is teaching us in the parable that follows the Lord's Prayer in today's lesson. It's pretty straightforward when we understand that the friend in the parable, the one who is asleep and doesn't seem to want to be bothered is God. When we persist, and persist as shamelessly as the man in the parable, when we keep trying to communicate with God, God will answer and will give us whatever we need—not necessarily what we want, but what we need. "Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you." Sometimes the hard part is just knowing where to start. Christian author Anne Lamott, offers two basic prayers: "help me, help me, help me," and "thank you, thank you, thank you." They may be simple and basic, but very powerful, especially when they're offered to God in sincerity and faith. Certainly those are all we need to begin. Maybe we could start each morning by asking "help me, help me, help me," and end the day with "thank you, thank you, that you." But we could also reduce those words to the only one that matters to us: Jesus. We don't have to be pious or well-spoken; we only have to believe that when we call his name, he hears us.

The Rev. Barbara Crafton writes, "Don't be too hard on yourself about praying. God is delighted whenever and wherever you pray. Make it as easy on yourself as you can to gather discipline to yourself—use the same place each day, the same time, maybe light a candle to focus your senses, imagine the saints and angels in heaven, including your own personal ones, joining you as you begin. "*The Lord be with you,*" you will say, and they will answer you with love, "*and also with you.*"

Let's try that now. *The Lord be with you.* Let us pray.

*Amen. And amen.*