

Persist in Creating the Reality Our Prayers Describe and Be Changed
A Sermon for St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul, MN
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In the name of Jesus who taught us to pray boldly. Amen.

Confessing our sins is good for the soul, so, when it comes to my prayer life, let me begin by sharing my shortcomings. I'm a Myers-Briggs INFJ, an Enneagram Type Four, and a Pisces – and if you don't know what those categories of self-awareness mean, just know that when I neglect the daily discipline of caring for my mind, body, and spirit, I become overly introspective, emotional, and moody. In a word, I get grumpy. When I'm grumpy, I pray badly. God ceases to be God and instead, in my grumpy delusion, God becomes some sort of wizard-genie.

After hearing another outrage on the news, I say to the wizard-genie, “Dear God. That person is so hateful. Please let them die. Amen.” Or, after seeing someone especially good-looking, I say to the wizard-genie, “Dear God. That person is gorgeous! Please make me *that* gorgeous. Amen.” Or, after hearing theology that's utterly demonic and unloving (usually from fundamentalists): “Dear God. These people are heretics. Please rip out their tongues. Amen.” These are not prayers. These are sociopathic wish-dreams offered up grumpily to a non-existent wizard-genie. Thankfully, in today's Gospel Jesus teaches us not only

how to pray well; Jesus also teaches us about perseverance and persistence in practicing good prayer.

To get out of the habit of offering up wish-dreams to a wizard-genie, I turn to the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard's famous quote on prayer. Kierkegaard states, **“The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.”**¹ We are not making wishes for a wizard-genie to grant. In prayer we are opening ourselves up to being changed by God in whom we live, and move, and have our being (Acts 17:28). Jesus teaches us the language with which to pray. Language that changes the nature of those who pray the words of Jesus. My hero Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, **“Language is very powerful. Language does not just describe reality. Language creates the reality it describes.”**² By connecting Søren Kierkegaard's wisdom with Desmond Tutu's wisdom, perhaps today's Gospel is inviting each of us into a new way of understanding the meaning of prayer. Perhaps the very nature of each of us who pray in the language Jesus taught us is indeed changed, precisely because we create the reality the words of the Lord's Prayer describes.

¹ <https://www.sorenkierkegaard.nl/>

² <https://www.pbs.org/movers/journal/12282007/transcript2.html>

Imagine with me for a moment that when we address God as our parent, our nature changes because the language of Jesus' prayer creates a reality in which every person is cherished as a beloved child of God: our loving parent to whom we all belong; whose name is Holy, and whose kingdom of beloved community has already come. Our nature changes when the language of Jesus' prayer creates a reality in which we all give and receive daily bread to one another, no one is left hungry, we mutually restore one another's human dignity, and become God's kingdom of beloved community. Our nature changes when the language of Jesus' prayer creates a reality in which we accept God's forgiveness, we forgive each other, we forgive ourselves, and know that God's kingdom of beloved community has come. Our nature changes when the language of Jesus' prayer creates a reality in which we keep each other out of temptation's way, we deliver one another from evil, and let God's kingdom of beloved community come. All of this is easier said than done. So, how do we practice this way of praying in language that creates realities that change our very nature? And how do we honor the call of today's Gospel to persist in prayer?

As an introvert and baby contemplative, I've been delighted to serve on the Board of Directors for the Episcopal House of Prayer. The Episcopal House of

Prayer introduced me to the ancient Christian practice of Contemplative Prayer, and I fell in love with work of Augustinian Priest Martin Laird who regularly leads contemplative retreats at the House of Prayer. Fr. Martin Laird writes,

Contemplation is the way out of the great self-centered psychodrama. When interior silence is discovered, compassion flows. If we deepen our inner silence, our compassion flows. If we deepen our inner silence, our compassion for others is deepened. We cannot pass through the doorways of silence without becoming part of God's embrace of all humanity in its suffering and joy.³

I believe that taking time to silence our minds, bodies, and spirits is essential to praying well. We read in Scripture that Jesus persistently left his companions to go off to solitary places to pray (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:15-16; Luke 6:12-13; Matthew 14:13; Mark 6:31-32; Matthew 14:23; Luke 9:18). To know how to respond to the ceaseless injustice that confronts us daily, as followers of Jesus, we must find solitary places to pray for a very specific reason. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams makes the following connection between praying and living justly in the world. Prayer connects us, he writes, with:

Being the kind of mature human being who is not trapped by selfishness, fear of others, anxiety about the future, or the desire to succeed at others' expense. Prayer is the life of Jesus coming alive in you, so it is hardly surprising if it is absolutely bound up in a certain way of being human

³ M S. Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 115.

which is about reconciliation, mercy, and freely extending the welcome and the love of God to others.⁴

Imagine what each of us would be like if we allowed prayer to change us into the reconciliation, mercy, freedom, welcome, and love of God? Imagine what our families, our neighborhoods, our churches, our schools, our businesses, and our leaders would be like if we allowed prayer to change us and them into the reconciliation, mercy, freedom, welcome, and love of God? This is easier imagined than accomplished because our apathy, indifference, cynicism, and idol-worship our ego is so much easier. And this is precisely why Jesus teaches us to persist in praying. To persist in asking, seeking, and knocking on doors until we become reconciliation, mercy, freedom, welcome, and the love of God. In her essay, *Furor Scribendi*, African American science fiction author Octavia Butler said it best. She writes,

First forget *inspiration*. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you're inspired or not. Habit will help you finish and polish your [work]. Inspiration won't. Habit is persistence in practice.⁵

⁴ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 80-81.

⁵ Octavia E. Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 2nd ed. (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 141.

We are people of Common Prayer. Daily Morning Prayer, Noonday Prayer, Daily Evening Prayer, Compline, and Holy Eucharist are dependable habits to sustain us whether we're inspired to pray or not. By persisting in the habit of practicing prayer Rowan Williams observes that,

Prayer, more and more, is not something *we* do, but what we are *letting God do in us;*" that "prayer is God's work in us... It is opening our minds and hearts and saying to God, 'Here is your Son [Jesus], praying in me through the Holy Spirit. Please listen to him, because I want [Jesus] to be working, acting and loving in me."⁶

Williams writes, "That, in a nutshell, is prayer – letting Jesus pray in you."⁷ When we persist in asking that all people be treated with dignity and wholeheartedly give each other that gift of mutual compassion, Jesus is praying in us. When we persist in seeking out and searching for kinship across our many lines of difference, we will find reconciliation, which is Jesus praying in us. When we persist in knocking on closed doors for those who have been locked out by systems of oppression, doors do open, and Jesus is praying in us. The language we pray creates the reality it describes and our very nature changes. I close with one last quote from Rowan Williams:

Prayer is about reconciliation, justice, and how it changes your attitude to other people and the world. Prayer is not a narrowly private activity; it

⁶ Williams, 78, 80.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

is about your *belonging* in the body of Christ, and in the family of humanity. If you understand what is going on when you pray, then the world changes. And if in prayer you are gradually becoming attuned to the will and purpose of God, then the divine power that comes into you is bound to find its outlet in this healing of relations. That is not to say that you pray *in order to be* a nicer person, or so that justice and reconciliation will happen. You pray *because Christ is in you*. And if that is really happening, then the sort of things you can expect to see developing around you are justice and reconciliation.⁸

Amen.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 72-73.