

**Sermon – “How to Pray - The Lord’s Prayer”**  
**Matthew 6:5-15**  
**March 22, 2017**

What is prayer? Well, this weekend if you watch any NCAA tournament action, and I know “we Badgers” will be doing some of that, you’ll likely see thousands of college fans standing behind the opposing team’s basket waving their arms and chanting and pounding inflatables in their school colors in a pious wish that the other team’s All American point guard will miss the front end of a one & one, keep it a one possession game, and thereby give their team one final chance to throw in a buzzer beater for the win. I guess you could call that prayer, particularly since that same point guard is likely a 90% free throw shooter with a reputation for “*ice in his veins*”. Or maybe prayer is typified by the more sedate ad taken out a few years ago by the Archdiocese of Montreal, showing a picture of that city’s beloved hockey team the Canadians juxtaposed over the current standings in the NHL’s Eastern Division, showing them next to last with less than a month to go in the season. The banner of the ad was simple and succinct – “*Prions - Let us pray.*” “*Ask and it will be given you*”, Jesus said. But that?

Our lessons tonight are some of Jesus’ clearest teachings on prayer. Paired together Matthew 6, and Luke 18 make one thing is clear...Jesus is not impressed by many words...and prayer is a opening of the heart – not just the mouth, not that words are forbidden or useless. But if as Matthew suggests, prayer is something “*done in secret, to a God who sees in secret*”, then at the very least we must consider a definition of prayer that sees it as something other than simply words expressed. Ole Kristian Hallesby, 20<sup>th</sup> century author and teacher in the Norwegian Lutheran Church, began with a simple definition...prayer is “*helplessness.*” Pray is first and foremost the conviction in our heart that our needs cannot be fully or adequately met by our own efforts. In Lent we chiefly acknowledge this helplessness in the face of our own mortality and our bondage to sin. Prayer is the means by which we honestly express this.

Ah, but how many Christians scoff at this scenario - the unbeliever or occasional worshipper, when some situation into which they have wandered, by chance or by choice leaves them in trouble utter some phrase like “*well, why not try a prayer*”. We might be tempted to dismiss this as nothing but desperation and a waste of breathe. We might be tempted to conclude, we steady Christians that is, that our relationship with the Lord over the long haul frees us from such desperate stabs at God, these “*last resort prayers*”. We ought to rethink that however. If we read out texts carefully tonight, particularly the lesson from Luke, we would have to conclude that any prayer that does not arise out of helplessness is not genuine Christian prayer. We are both in virtue of our need of mercy and in virtue of even knowing how to begin to address God - *helpless.*

Yet dear Christian know this...helplessness is not weakness as we or the world would suppose, but a vigor and vitality unlike any the world knows or could give. It is not an enemy of faith, but in fact the most powerful ally we have, it is the genuine voice of faith. When we pray as though helpless, or desperate, we pray ourselves into the arms of God, into the court of the judge who is thoroughly just, but endlessly merciful and good. And then, paradoxically, we are stronger than we could ever imagine.

Then we have the might of heaven surrounding us, the command of God to pray impelling us, the mind and manner of God directing us, and yes, wonderfully, owing to this wonderful thing called “the Lord’s Prayer” - the very words of Christ teaching us. Prayer is blessed honesty, naming for ourselves the state God already knows we are in. Luther, in discussing his catechism, pointed out that in the Ten Commandments, we see all too clearly what God expects of us. In the Apostle’s Creed, we confess what we can expect of God – a creator who preserves us, a Savior who forgives us, and a Spirit that will keep us attentive to Christ and assured of our salvation. And in the Lord’s Prayer, Luther said, we are shown how to ask for such great gifts.

We say “Father”, because Jesus did and gives us permission to do the same. We say “*hallowed be your name*” because that is what God told Moses and Israel in the second commandment. We say “*give us this day our daily bread*” because, as Luther told us, God is our creator, who “*has given and still preserves our bodies and souls and all their needs.*” We pray “*lead us not into temptation*” because in his most agonizing, urgent – and if you will “desperate” prayer, Jesus asked his father to do the same – asking the cup of suffering be removed from his lips, but also that this very natural human temptation be met by the faith to say “*nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.*” Prayer is conversation, not formula however.

Consider if you will a child who is told she needs a nap. Not so she insists, and runs from her mother’s invitation. Mom picks her up and carries her to her room, lays her down, and closes the door. Soon the door bursts open and child insists on an alternative solution...a snack...maybe a little ice cream mom, or some popcorn will do the trick, and re-energize me. Mother suggests *again* the nap is best. So the precocious child walks mom to the refrigerator, showing exactly what she needs and even where it can be found. Mom now *insists* on a nap. The child, placed again in her room, calls out over the next 20 minutes or so about the riches and virtues of the fridge. Till comes the silence of exhaustion, a child eventually surrendering to what she needs in place of what she in protest said she wanted. With or without words, consciously or unconsciously, her tired body concluded...“*we’ll, I guess I could try a nap.*”

That is precisely what prayer is, helplessness and faithful surrender to what God knows we need. And no matter how expressed, it is confidence that God hears and God will know what to do.

This is most certainly true. AMEN

*Over the next few moments....let us practice what we preach.*

*In silence, to God who hears what is said in secret, I invite you to pray.*