

Giving Out, Not Giving Up: How to Pray  
Matthew 6:5-15 & 2Kings 4:27-37  
February 27, 2021

Today is the second Sunday of Lent. This year during Lent we are intentionally giving out something in the love of God and neighbors, rather than giving up something for our own self-improvement. When we give out, we can make room to receive the grace of God. In Jesus' sermon on the mountain Jesus teaches us to give out what we have and who we are, to help the poor, to pray, to store treasures in heaven, to fast, and not to worry about life. They are means of grace through which we receive God's grace; forgiveness, blessings, healing, salvation, and our life itself. Today's topic of giving out is prayer. In prayer we give out our time, attention, care, and all that who we are. Prayer is not bunch of words.

In Jesus' teaching about prayer in today's gospel reading, Jesus says not to pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see you. We almost laughed (didn't we?) when we heard it because for us it didn't make sense at all. No one pray on the street corners or in marketplaces. We may think what happened at that time. Why did people pray on the street corners? Jesus said they did that to show off their piety. For them, the law of the society was their religious laws, and the religious leaders and scholars had the power in politics and economy, not just in religion. Piety was powerful commodity and people used it to show off their status or to show off who they were. Here, we may stop laughing at them and look at ourselves. What do we do on the street corners and marketplaces to show off ourselves? I think we like to drive fancy cars, wear fancy jewelry, and clothes, or shop and eat at fancy places to show off. I have a couple of summer dresses that my sister gave me several years ago. I like them but there are not many opportunities for me to wear them. I can't wear them on Sunday morning at worship, or hospital visits, or going to church meetings. So, I figured out how I could show off my favorite dresses. I go to farmers' market. When I go to farmers' market in my favorite dress, I feel I am showy, though no one pays attention to me or my dress. It just gives me some showy satisfaction. How about you? What do you show off and how do you do it? Can you say confidently that you don't have any desire to show off anything? But once we admit our desire of showing off, I believe we understand Jesus' teaching of prayer better. Jesus teaches us that we pray not to call attention to ourselves, but to give out ourselves for the love of God and the love of our neighbors. So, to pray is to love. As love is not selfish, boasting, or arrogant, prayer shouldn't be selfish, boating or arrogant.

But prayer is not just one-way movement of giving out. Prayer is back and forth movement between us and God, between God's continual grace and our continual response to it. It also is a movement between our pure silence in God's presence and our reflection on the meaning of what we learn about God, ourselves, and others from the experience of our prayer. In that sense, prayer is on-going learning. Also, prayer is a movement between us and the whole Christian community. In our faith community prayer is the undergirding of our worship, our deep friendships and sometimes even divisions and conflicts. In that sense, prayer is on-going healing and reconciling. Also, prayer connects us with ourselves; it is the link between our new selves that are always being transformed into God's loving image and our old selves with which we must come to terms if we are to be transformed. By prayer we are able to discover who we are and move toward who we are to become. In that sense, prayer is on-going transformation.

We can pray in silence and in words. We can pray behind closed doors and in open places. We can pray for others and for ourselves. We can pray for anyone, anything, anytime, in any forms and any postures, as long as we pray in love of God and neighbors including ourselves.

So, Jesus taught his disciples a prayer. We call it the Lord's prayer. It has two parts: for the love of God and for the love of neighbors. In his prayer Jesus calls God, abba, our father. What can be a more loving thing than having someone to call mom or dad. Once we call God dad, we can say anything to God from there. One day my son called me, mother, and I dropped the pan I held in my hand. I said, "What? Why do you call me mother? I am your mom. Call me mom and say whatever you want and need to say." Sometimes people tell me they don't know how to pray. I ask them what their struggles, pains, hopes, and longings are. Tell me anything. Once they are done with speaking, I ask them to close eyes and call God father. Just say, "father." From there, they can say the same things they just told me. In love we pray for hollowing God's name, coming God's kingdom, and doing God's will. It is our longing for the day when all people will know God in love and revere God. The second part addresses our three basic needs in love for neighbors, including ourselves: the daily bread, ongoing forgiveness, and deliverance. Christian salvation is all about we have enough bread for everyone, we are forgiven in our soul to live in peace with neighbors and with ourselves, and we are delivered or saved for eternal life. The Lord's prayer has all of them.

Because we pray in love, we can pray anywhere but sometimes we need to close the door when we pray. When Elisha prayed for the Shunamite woman's son in today's Old Testament reading, he closed the door behind the two of them. No one was allowed to come in, even his mother. The boy was dead, and Elisha didn't know what was going on. He told the woman that the Lord didn't tell him why the boy was sick all of sudden and whether he could bring him back to life or not. Elisha faced the boy's mortality without knowing what God was doing. Sometimes we need to close the door and pray to God about our own mortality. We need to face it in prayer. About our own mortality, we don't know when it happens, or how it happens or what God's is doing. Only one thing we know is that we all die, and we need to face it in prayer in the behind closed door before it happens. Prayer is eschatology, looking forward the life after death, and living this life in preparation of that day. In our prayer, not only we give out our time, attention, care and love but we totally throw ourselves out to the unknown place and time which is eternal life in trust in God. In Lent we practice praying behind closed doors and living in the trust of God in prayer to face uncertain times of this life and the life after death. Lent is time to face our mortality and willingly give out what we have and all that we are. Thanks be to God.