

Considering the Jesus Prayer: Living with God

Watch the You tube video of Victoria Jones reciting the Lord's Prayer.

A few weeks ago here at the church, we had the Oakville Children's Music Theatre production of Anne of Green Gables, the Musical. In one of the early scenes, after Anne has arrived for her first night at Green Gables, her new guardian Marilla is mildly shocked to discover that no one has ever taught Anne to pray at bedtime.

In Lucy Maud Montgomery's original novel, in a different part of the story, Anne says, "Saying one's prayers is not the same as praying". What do you think about that? Is there a difference between saying and praying? What's the difference?

Watching the video of little Victoria Jones reminds me of one of the differences of which I try to be aware. When you pray, who are you conscious of being with? Who are you relating to? Do you feel like you are just saying words, or is there something more going on? Do you have a sense that you are heard? Do you have an image, or idea, or feeling within you, about the hearer?

In the video, Victoria seems to be relating directly to the person holding the camera- probably her mother. (Which makes total sense, she's a young child, who knows her mother is watching!)

Little Victoria looks safe, and happy, and totally at peace with herself. When Jesus taught his friends the Lord's Prayer, the word he used at the beginning of the prayer was Abba. Abba in Jesus' mother tongue, Aramaic, was more like Daddy than the formal title Father.

Prayer at its most basic, is being with God. Basic to being with someone else is being able to recognize that they are there, and that it is good and safe to be with them.

People who study the stages of faith development say that when a child first learns to recognize the other- somebody other than themselves, this is a step towards relating to God. If the child has healthy and positive connections to the powerful others in their life, the sources of food, security, attention, love, encouragement, then it may be easier for the child to imagine relating to the "other" that is God.

We can, in this sense, suggest, or represent God for each other. This is something to remember in our dealings not only with the children in our lives, but with all others- we can help them, or hinder them, in their being able to envision God. There is a hymn that says we are the hands and feet of Christ. We are also the eyes and ears of God. When we deeply listen to each other, we are nurturing the sense that what the other person says is worth hearing.

We live out our faith, and our love of God, with our minds, bodies, hearts and souls. With what we do, and what we say. And with how we listen.

Little Victoria in the video has been learning to memorize the Lord's Prayer. Sometimes we call that "knowing it by heart".

There are drawbacks to memorizing prayers, especially the Lord's Prayer. It can put the focus on the prayer itself, rather than on the activity of praying- it can be as Anne Shirley said it, "saying rather than praying". It is also possible to get overly fixated on getting the words right.

My sense is that Jesus was offering us the possibility of relating to God, without reason to fear that we might get the words wrong. I believe that Jesus wanted us to think of God more like a loving parent who is just happy to be in conversation with their beloved child, rather than a strict school teacher who takes off marks if you make mistakes in your memory work.

I think Jesus may have been offering more of an example, or model for how to pray, rather than prescribing what words to use.

But that is not to say it is a bad thing to memorize the Lord's Prayer. If we are able to say what everyone else is saying, we can feel part of the community of faith. It can be good to have that shared experience.

During the World Cup of soccer I have been noticing all the national flags on people's houses and cars, and see that this represents more than just cheering on a team- the flag is also a statement, or a claim

of identity. I would not think of putting a Portuguese or Australian flag on my car- or even wearing a t-shirt with one of those flags printed on it-because that is not who I am.

The Lord's Prayer can serve a similar function. It's a bit like waving God's flag. Saying the Lord's Prayer is a way of declaring, "I am one of the people who prays the way Jesus taught." It is also good to remember that this was not the only way that Jesus prayed.

The mainline Christian Church in our part of the world is beginning to recover the importance of teaching people how to pray. I think for a long time we have kind of assumed that it was something that came naturally, like breathing, or walking, or running. But people who sing, or dance, or do yoga, or speak on stage have to learn special breathing techniques. Most of us needed help learning to walk.

I know that as a runner, I have benefited greatly from many teachers, who have taught me how to train to run farther, and faster, and to greater success, and with less pain, than I ever could on my own.

Things worth doing, are worth learning to do well. Most things we learn to do well take years of practice. Why would we think that prayer would be any different? Maybe it has to do with the busy, noisy, fast-paced, instant results kind of world we live in.

In the early Christian Church, around the 3rd and 4th centuries after the time of Jesus, prospective new Christians were called "catechumens", and they took part in 3 years of study and training before they would be baptized and received formally into the church. Only after they had been baptized would they be taught the Lord's Prayer.

Earlier I mentioned that when we repeat something we have memorized, we sometimes say that we know it by heart. I wanted to come back to the idea of knowing something by heart, or praying from the heart. In my sermon on Trinity Sunday I talked about how the definition of belief has evolved over the last few centuries from something we do with our hearts, into something we do with our heads. Getting the words exactly right is a good example of this- as if having the right idea in our head about prayer will bring us closer to God.

The word “believe” in its original meaning is actually closer to “love”, than to “agree”. It may be that our prayer needs to be more heart-felt and less a mental exercise.

Some people use the Lord’s Prayer as a way to help themselves move down into their hearts. They silently pray the words of the Lord’s Prayer, slowly, and meditatively. They don’t have to think about the actual words, because they know it so well. They may repeat the prayer many times, over and over again.

Some just take a portion of the prayer, and repeat that phrase to themselves. Some use prayer beads while they do this. Others knit, or knead bread, or wash the dishes, or weed the garden, or vacuum their carpets while they do this. The point is not the actual words of the prayer, but to be intentional about spending that time being with God.

What I would like us to do now is to take moment or two of silent reflection, after which we will pray the Lord’s Prayer. I will say it out loud, one line at a time, with pauses between each line. If you want, you can echo the words after me, or you can just pray along in silence. The idea is to slow down, and let the prayer represent our heart’s desire to just consciously be with God, for at least the length of time it takes to pray the prayer.

We’ll settle now into silence.

Praying the Lord’s Prayer slowly, a line at a time.

The Lord’s Prayer

**Our father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen**