

**"The Controversy of Prayer"
The Rev. James Ward**

**Eighth Sunday after
Pentecost
Proper 12
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Prayer is strangely one of the more controversial topics among contemporary Christians. I have always been amazed at the different approaches that my colleagues among ordained take to the question of prayer. After all, as Episcopalians most of us feel most comfortable reading the set prayers we have available in our Prayer Book. At least this provides a kind of commonality for our attempts to pray in common. Another approach is to simply sit quietly, engaging in contemplation or meditation. Of course, this is particularly comfortable in Marin where people are as likely to be familiar with zen meditation as they are with talking to God through "Jesus Christ."

Beneath these surface concerns is, I think, the real issue. And it is simply the question "Is there a God to listen or hear or answer our prayers?" Again, the rather tentative, humble approach of our own tradition addresses this question in a way that many people can find useful. It's useful in that it doesn't push an answer on any particular worshiper or prospective prayer. There isn't an approach that is required or even assumed. Though newcomers sometimes can mistake the formality of our worship for universal consent. The truth is that we are far from unanimity on anything. Agnostics and even functional atheists are always welcome. In fact in the early Church Christians were executed for the charge of atheism because they did not worship the commonly know gods of the Empire all of whom were summed up in Emperor worship. So today, everybody's answer to the question whether there's a God to answer prayer is revealed very privately in whether they pray and if they do in how they pray.

Sometimes when I've asked people for prayers about a certain issue or concern the response I've gotten is, "I didn't know it was that bad?" as if prayer beyond saying "Grace" or praying in church is a matter of desperation, something we do as a last resort, when all else has failed, a kind of magical action that, as we say "can't hurt, even though it's not likely to help." Or as I've observed, in prayer groups where open, out loud prayer is customary, there is a distinction between a reticent wording like "I want to pray for so and so," or "I want to pray that such and such would happen." This language can seem to reveal a longing that there is such a God who is *really there* and who "cares and can do something" and a hope that someone in this group or the group as a whole can access this God. In contrast I notice a more immediate mode of address some people are comfortable using as if they were in a conversation with a friend who though invisible is actually present.

The question of whether God exists or if God exists whether that God hears my prayer is not an issue that can be settled before hand. I'd like to suggest that prayer is an act of imagination. It's an "as if" conversation with the Almighty Other whom Jesus teaches us to call "Father," it's a role playing exercise which is best approached by means of a "suspension of disbelief". I want further to propose to you today that the purpose of this conversational exercise is not to get from God good stuff we want or think we need for ourselves or for the world. Rather prayer is training for our true human vocation: the conversion of the principalities and powers, what Paul calls "the elemental spirits of the universe" and "every rule and authority."

First let's talk about the development by means of this conversation of an "as if" relationship with the Other and it's impact on our Self, and then let's talk briefly about the engagement of the spiritual powers for which this exercise is to prepare us.

The most important thing you can take from this sermon is that it is critical that Jesus instructs us to call the one whom we are to address in prayer "Father." Of course there are lots of reasons why it might be difficult for us, even problematic, to address God as "father." After all parents are not perfect and psychology reminds us that those with whom we claim to have had the fewest problems are often the most troubling. And if "mother" works better for you than by all means call God "mother." Beyond all the platitudes about how that with our parents is the foundational, primal relationship, and about how reframing God as our true parent reminds us that we are all siblings of one another, children of the same parent, let's face it, we can never really get past what our parents, our father and mother, have done for us and to us. Rather than running from that nexus, as if we really could (according to the great American myth) reinvent ourselves without reference to our families of origin, Jesus is calling us to run toward our parents. To address God through our parents means that we must come to terms with them, to continually appreciate their significance in our lives and carefully differentiate ourselves from them. This is the great task of spiritual maturity. It makes us calm and bold in the face of those forces in the world that seek to intimidate or shame us; strangely they look like our parents.

To declare then that the name of our true parent is "holy" or "hallowed" is to affirm that the intentionality of the universe, the "way things are" is ultimately good, loving, and personal. And this is not merely an affirmation to create our own reality by strength of will; it is to confirm the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, who in teaching us to say "hallowed be thy name" is reminding us of how his mission reveals God's lavish grace and favor toward us in the deepest and most personal way. To put this in conversation with the challenging task of

embracing our parents is to accept the healing of the world as our task. It is to adopt Jesus' mission as our own. "Your kingdom come." Bring it on! But it is to do so humbly, in proper relation to God, Jesus, and our own history.

This proper relationship is that of a child freely and confidently asking nourishment from our loving parent. We've had a rare privilege in our house for the past two weeks this summer of watching from a two foot distance just outside Erik's bedroom window the hatching and fledging of two baby robins. I imagine this attitude of asking as that of these new hatchlings who stretch their necks beyond what you would believe possible and cry out to their attentive parents who never fail to provide juicy worms. There is no reticence, no *quid pro quo* on either side. It is part of the abundant provision of some amazing dance that they ask and receive. "How much more will God provide for you," says Luke's Jesus.

This asking is at the heart of our true vocation. It is not as we have generally accepted it to become free and independent. Rather our true vocation is to become rightly dependent. For even when we purpose independence or claim it financially or relationally, we almost inevitably do so as an anxious reaction which indentures us to some false image of freedom and independence, which puts us in hock to the "elemental spirits."

Jesus' instructions to his disciples on prayer provide for us a structure for the development of a relationship with the invisible Other. And since the self is always a function of our relationships, this "as if" relationship shapes us after the image of God which Jesus sketches in his instructions on prayer for his disciples. In contrast to what usually shapes us from our interactions with others, scandal, resentment and rivalry, that is, what Paul calls "empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe", we learn our desires from God in Jesus, who "having raised him from the dead . . . made us alive with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses." And further, God in Christ thus "having disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them in the cross," they no longer have any claim on us at all. So the function of this act of imagination we call prayer, this "as if" conversation, is to remind us of this truth and to train us from being captivated once again by the seductions of the rulers and authorities.

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