

Each August, Deacons in our diocese must submit an annual report to Bishop Sutton. This covers things like what we've done for continuing education, what ministries we're involved in, and my favorite, "How is your spiritual life?"

I'm joking, this is definitely not my favorite question. Truth be told, as the question speaks to the state of my spiritual disciplines including my prayer life, it gets me a little sweaty under the collar.

As someone who came to Christianity as an adult, I've long struggled with my expectations of prayer. No one ever taught me to pray. I learned it piecemeal over the years, through worship, study, and observation.

Some forms of prayer come easily for me: In our liturgy, for example, I find great peace in sharing the same prayers with saints across the ages, as we praise and confess and worship together in community.

My struggles are more with prayer as a *personal* discipline. What exactly is that supposed to look like?

An old Navy friend of mine has ongoing conversations throughout the day with Jesus—as naturally as if she were chatting with a close pal—everything from her appreciation for a stunning sunset, to her irritation with a difficult coworker. This intimate dialogue doesn't work well for me. I've attempted it: like trying to stuff my feet into a pair of too-small shoes, the resulting discomfort tells me it's not a great fit.

Over the years, I've come to learn and accept that prayer is as personal and diverse as we are in our varied histories and cultures and contexts: some people pray at set times, such as through our Daily Offices. Some experience prayer

through music and art, some through nature, others through meditation, and many through a combination of those things.

The Book of Common Prayer Catechism teaches that: "Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with our without words."

Episcopal priest Cathy George expands on this in her book *You Are Already Praying*. She says, "It all counts. The desire to connect with God, to pray, is a seed planted within us by the Holy Spirit. We don't plant it, God does. We water it. We foster its growth. And when we do, its branches begin to extend into everything we do, all day long, all week long. Our daily lives become a living prayer—our response to the unceasing presence of God within us and around us."

This approach to God as an unceasing presence in our midst offers me some assurance that my prayer life is not as undisciplined as I believe—or that the discipline matters much less than I think.

For example, I have found meaningful moments of connection with God while seated in Sukhasana pose on my yoga mat. Last week while hiking in Harper's Ferry, I heard God's whisper in the fluttering wings of a woodpecker that swooped overhead and landed on a nearby tree.

But even as I recognize moments like these, still, I continue to wrestle with the nagging feeling that I'm somehow falling short in my prayer life. And so I find myself comforted by today's Gospel and one disciple's request, "Lord, teach us how to pray."

Now, the early disciples would presumably know how to pray. They would be well-familiar with prayer in the manner taught them by their rabbis, as they'd

experienced at temple throughout their lives. So, what would make them ask such a question of Jesus in this moment?

We could speculate that in being with Jesus these many months and hearing him teach of The Father, they were seeing God in a new light, one that compelled them to want to really get to know him and be drawn into closer relationship with him.

And Jesus offers a two-part response to the question. First, he teaches the central prayer that has unified Christians across time and space: The Lord's Prayer.

It's a prayer most of us are very comfortable with. Many learn it at an early age. Clergy can tell you that in bringing communion to people suffering from dementia, this is often the one prayer they can recite from memory, even if they say nothing else the entire visit.

We could spend a good deal of time unpacking the various parts of The Lord's Prayer. But I'm more interested this morning in what comes after Jesus gives us that communal prayer, that is, the side trip we take in Jesus's parable.

Whenever Jesus teaches a parable, I like to imagine myself in the shoes of the different characters. In this story, we have Friend #1, the friend whom you boldly go to at midnight, asking for bread. And we have Friend #2, the friend who must decide whether to get up and respond to your request.

I can tell you that from the state of mind I've found myself lately, I'm drawn to Friend #2: the friend lying in bed, grumbling that he does not wish to come to the door.

I recently confided to a parishioner that I've been fantasizing about retiring abroad, leaving all the ugliness of this country behind. This parishioner is someone who, whether she realizes it or not, has been a wonderful pastor to me. And I found myself lamenting to her that as someone who proudly served this nation for 20 years, I felt somewhat disturbed by these fantasies. Even so, I rationalized that my vocation as a deacon would not be confined by national borders. And this is true. Point in case: an Episcopal priest and friend of mine recently packed up and moved to Spain, where she now leads pilgrimages on the Camino de Santiago.

A few years ago, my husband and I traveled to Spain for our 25th wedding anniversary. It's a place we could both easily see ourselves settling for the rest of our days, enjoying a pleasant, peaceful lifestyle. In fact, I've read several articles recently about how Americans can retire well in Spain or its neighbor Portugal. I'm apparently not alone in my musings.

This parishioner listened to me go on about how there must be a better place than *here*. And when I finally fell quiet, she remarked that while she empathized with my feelings, she refused to give up. She'd fought too hard over the years for the rights of others, especially those unable to battle for themselves, and saw the need as simply too immense. She simply would not give up.

Her words certainly gave me pause. And later, as I thought more about it, this realization dawned: In my fantasies of fleeing, I wasn't really seeking a place less violent, less divided, less broken. I was seeking a space of ease and comfort. Like Friend #2 in Jesus's parable, I wanted to snuggle in my warm bed with my children safe nearby, and awake each morning less anxious, less frustrated, less disappointed.

Alas, this is not the disciple's life.

If I am like Friend #2 in Jesus's parable, this parishioner certainly embodies Friend #1: persistent, bold, relentless in time and again seeking God's help in responding to the needs of others. And if we are like the friends in this parable, then for me, our entire exchange was itself a blessed experience of prayer.

The issue isn't where we go. It's what we're searching for. The question for all of us is: What are we seeking through prayer? And what is God offering us?

In considering our reading from Genesis today, we might wonder if Abraham asked himself these very questions, as he grappled with the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Repeatedly he says, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord," even as he acknowledges, "I who am but ashes and dust." Boldly he seeks God's mercy for the people of those cursed cities. Despite his fear of God's anger and feelings of unworthiness, he persists.

Indeed, we know God does destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Later in Genesis we learn that Abraham "...looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace." What must Abraham have been thinking then of his conversation with God?

What are we seeking through prayer? And what is God offering us?

Now more than ever, we disciples are called in prayer to fight the powers of darkness: darkness that strives to rob others of their rights, darkness that tries to paint some as inferior and unworthy, darkness that seeks to spread violence and hatred.

Now more than ever, we stand before open doors leading to uncomfortable places. Will we turn and retreat to our safe spaces? Or will we step boldly over the threshold, willing to be the healing light of Christ in this broken and hurting world?

Today's scripture offers us a lens through which to see the possibility for prayer in our everyday lives. What do you personally seek from prayer? And are you open to what God offers in response?

Not only the blessings we can name aloud, but the responses that seem far from what we ask of God. The unexpected, transformative connections we make with others, and our call to help grow the kingdom of God. When we seek and are open to those things, God gives us what we need—and infinitely more.

Jesus beckons us to emerge from our safe spaces, to give to a friend who wants to give to another. To let "Our daily lives become a living prayer—our response to the unceasing presence of God within us and around us."

I'd like to close in the words of a prayer I believe embodies this ideal, the Great Spirit Prayer¹ of the Navajo nation:

Oh, Great Spirit,
Whose voice I hear in the winds
and whose breath gives life to all the world.
Hear me! I need your strength and wisdom.
Let me walk in beauty, and make my eyes
ever hold the red and purple sunset.
Make my hands respect the things you have made

¹ Translated by Lakota Sioux Chief Yellow Lark in 1887

Let's Get Personal
Rev. Denise Schiavone

and my ears sharp to hear your voice.
Make me wise so that I may understand
the things you have taught my people.
Let me learn the lessons you have hidden
in every leaf and rock.

Help me remain calm and strong in the
face of all that comes towards me.
Help me find compassion without
empathy overwhelming me.
I seek strength, not to be greater than my brother,
but to fight my greatest enemy: myself.
Make me always ready to come to you
with clean hands and straight eyes.
So when life fades, as the fading sunset,
my spirit may come to you without shame.