

About twelve years ago, I went to a clergy retreat led by Brother Curtis, an Episcopal monk and priest from the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Boston. Brother Curtis was nationally renowned for his insightful meditations and counsel; over the span of those few days at the retreat he did not disappoint. In response to what I heard him say, I decided I wanted to ask him, as a kind of spiritual director, about my prayer life. For the previous two decades I had been raised and expected to exercise a fairly rigorous and structured form of prayer: the daily, half-hour long Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, noonday prayers, and several other devotions. I don't mind telling you that at that time my prayer-tank was empty; I felt spiritually dry and I wondered whether there was some other organized form of prayer that might prove to be more fruitful. Brother Curtis agreed to see me and, after he listened to my story, he said, "Why don't you just let your whole life be a prayer?" I had no idea of what he meant. I wasn't ready to hear it. But I think I may be starting to understand.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with a Rule, which is another name for a structured prayer life. Today we admitted four new members of the Daughters of the King, a community of woman bound by a vow to pray daily and to perform acts of service. The problem for some of us when approaching to prayer is that we look for techniques and structured practices, as if prayer were a formal diet or an exercise regimen. The fact is that the healthiest kind of prayer is not so much a prescribable technique as it is an organic conversation. That's part of the reason why today's Old Testament reading, in which Abraham essentially haggles with God to spare the cities of Sodom and Gamorrah, fits with the Gospel: it is not really about God's vindictiveness; it's about the conversational relationship Abraham enjoys with God. I want to ask you to pick up the red book in your pew racks—the Book of Common Prayer. Turn to page 856. You'll see on the bottom of the page that this is the Catechism, which is a questions-and-response course of instruction about what we, like many Christians, believe. In the middle of page 856, you'll find a section with the heading "Prayer and Worship." The first question in that section is, "What is prayer?" Below it you'll find the answer: "Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words." Prayer is a response to God. Prayer is not so much a stony-face, tight-lipped, teeth-gritting proactive program as it is a naturally reactive reply to God's promptings. When our heart, so to speak, desires to pray, few lessons are needed; when we do not want to pray, no lesson will be sufficient. In fact, in these situations of spiritual resistance, a prescription for regular prayer can, in fact, be harmful and lead to resented with God, not a conversation with Him.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus retreats for a time of prayer, and when He returns one of His disciples ask sHim to teach them how to pray like He does. In other words, prayer is something they want to do and not something He commands them to do. The Christian life is not about becoming better, much less perfect; it is coming to terms with facts that God loves us as we are. Throughout His ministry, Jesus has demonstrated a variety of styles of prayer. He prays in community in synagogues and the Temple; He prays alone in the wilderness. He prays out loud at the raising of Lazarus; He describes praying in secret in closets where no one can see. He prays in confidence, knowing that His Father hears Him; He prays in desolation when He feels God has abandoned Him. When His disciples ask Him what they should do, He teaches them the Lord's Prayer, also known as the Our Father.

At this point I need to stress that the version of the Lord's Prayer we heard this morning is different from the one we offer in the liturgy: it comes from Luke's Gospel, which is shorter than the version we use from the Gospel according to Matthew. There is no need to worry about these differences: Jesus talked a lot about prayer and certainly gave this instruction many times to many groups. Schoolteachers modify aspects of their lessons to meet the needs of different students; politicians modify aspects of their same stump speech to fit the context of their audience. It's the same way with the Lord's Prayer. One point we can draw from this is that the Lord's Prayer, as rich and powerful as it is, is not a magical incantation. While it is a good thing for us to memorize and to teach to children, the Our Father can be thought of as a general outline of various ways we respond to God, each of which are profound enough to meditate on for the rest of our lives.

For example, take the opening phrase: Jesus tells us to address God as "Father" or "Our Father." This instruction is new, radical, and unique to Jesus. Nowhere else in the Old Testament is God addressed as Father; at most, He is described by the prophets as being *like* a father. Jesus is not using shallow sentimentality exploit and manipulate our emotions about our earthly fathers. He knows that some of us have been blessed with good and healthy relationships with our fathers who taught us that we are loved and therefore are lovable, He also knows that some of us were not so blessed: for some of us, our father was absent, aloof, or even scary. God is our Father in a totally different way. God is Spirit; except for the Incarnation of God the Son as the Person of Jesus, He is not flesh. As Spirit, He is not gendered as we understand the term. God is called Father because He is Father to God the Son; likewise, God the Son is called Son because He is Son of the Father. These terms reflect the fundamental, unique, and eternal relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Therefore, when Jesus teaches us to call God Father, it is not sentimentalization;

it is inclusion and adoption. By virtue of our Baptism into the life of Christ we are embraced, swept upward, and bonded into the relationship between God the Father and God the Son in the power of God the Holy Spirit. God has become our Father because we have become one with God the Son. This is incredibly important for us to know for at least two reasons:

First, remember that St. Augustine talked about God the Holy Trinity as a perfect community of love. God the Father is the Lover; the One who pours out all that He has and all that He is to God the Son. God the Son is the Beloved; the One Who receives the total love of the Father and reflects it back to the Father in gratitude and obedience. God the Holy Spirit is the living, co-eternal relationship of love between the Father and the Son that is so totally complete that He is a third Person. At our Baptism, we were made One with God the Son; therefore, God the Father pours out all that He has and all that He is on us as well. Like Christ, without the Father we are nothing. Like Christ, because of the Father we possess everything, including eternal life.

Second, remember also that in the beginning of St. John's Gospel, John calls Jesus "the Word"—the Logos. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. ...And the Word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:1-3, 14)." God the Father speaks and declares His will; God the Son is the spoken word that makes it happen. In the beginning, God the Father said, "Let there be light," and God the Son brought light into being. Since we have been made One with Christ, we have been invited to share Christ's activity in this world; we have been invited to, in the words of our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, help to change the world from our nightmare it so often is into God's dream. Like Jesus, we proclaim the love of God; as a result, we cast out the evil spirits of fear, shame, and regret. Like Jesus, we forgive those who hurt us; as a result, we turn brokenness into reconciliation. Like Jesus, we lay down our selves, our souls and bodies, to serve others and to give of ourselves to those in need.

These two realities, and many, many others, are built on the first words of the prayer that Jesus taught us. Prayer, therefore, is not so much something we do as it is something that we are. Prayer is how we respond to what God has done for us in our creation, preservation, redemption, and promise of resurrection. Maybe that is what Brother Curtis meant when he suggested that we simply let our entire lives be a prayer. Maybe if we receive the grace to see ourselves as Christ sees us—beloved, delightful, and priceless—we might find ourselves turned toward God to pray to Him and with Him as His children.