

The last few years before I went to seminary I was living in Williamsport but working with this synod's youth event, when it was still held at what was, at that time, the Ramada in Altoona. One year I must have been very excited to get to the event, because when I reached the place on 99 where the speed limit drops, just before the 17th Street exit, I looked at my speedometer and realized I was driving at much too eager a speed. If you spend much time on the bypass, you know it's not unusual for one, two, even three patrol cars to monitor that stretch of road. So I hit the brakes, watched someone fly by me in the fast lane like I was standing still, and I prayed: *Lord, please remember I'm on my way to a church event, so don't let there be a cop sitting up there, or if there is, please, let him get that guy.* Sure enough, between the next two exits, out pulls a squad car, lights flashing, to pull over the driver who had just passed me. Be careful what you pray for?

Evidently, I am not the only person who needed help to pray the way Jesus wanted. We don't know how John instructed his disciples to pray, but we know that Jesus' disciples wanted their own lesson from him. What we have come to know as the Lord's Prayer is closer to Matthew's version of this story, but the same basic outline is found here in Luke's gospel. We could debate whether Jesus intended for us to repeat these exact words, as we in liturgical traditions do, or whether this was meant to be merely a template, as each week we pray for the church, the world, and all those in need by naming specific concerns that fall under those broad categories. Some Christians oppose memorized prayers, the concern being that we may repeat them without giving much thought to what we are saying, which is a valid concern. But the Lord's Prayer gives us a way to pray in unity across different Christian communities. And having spent many years with parishioners whose dementia prevents them from remembering who I am, or even who their own family members are, it's beautiful to get to that part of the communion liturgy and have them begin to pray along, remembering every word.

A good Lutheran perspective would say it's both/and. These exact words, or at least the words from Matthew's version, are a gift to our liturgical and meditative practice, *and* Jesus summarizes the kinds of things we should pray about: that God's name not be used to justify profane actions or ideologies; that the mercy and justice of God's kingdom be ever more fully realized among us, that our daily needs are met, that we be forgiven at least in proportion to how forgiving we are of others; that we will not be tempted away from the good to which God calls us. But Jesus does not stop at describing the appropriate *content* of our prayers; it's not just a question of *what* we should pray. Jesus goes on to give us examples of *how* we should pray, that is, with persistence and confidence.

Jesus first describes a friend waking up his neighbor at midnight to borrow food—not for himself, we notice, but for a hungry traveler who himself has arrived in the middle of the night. If

not out of kindness, at least because the friend keeps asking, the neighbor will get up and give him what he needs. I just spent a week at camp listening to especially the youngest campers wear down their counselors to do their favorite activities or to get five more minutes at the pool; persistence works. Another example is today's Genesis reading recounting Abraham's plea for Sodom and Gomorrah, asking God to spare them if only 50 righteous people can be found...or 45...or 40...or 30...or 20...or 10...Abraham begs God not to be angry at him each time he asks, but God never seems perturbed. This is a bit off topic, but it would be irresponsible to mention this passage without acknowledging the great harm that has been done by its misinterpretation; in spite of certain cultural assumptions, the prophet Ezekiel very clearly names the grave sin of Sodom as the people being *arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned; not helping the poor and needy [16:49]*. Whatever else you may have heard, *scripture* tells us that Sodom angered God by arrogance, greed, apathy, and failure to take care of the poor. God is not, however, bothered by how frequently or persistently we pray.

Jesus goes on to tell the disciples to boldly ask, and it will be given, search, and you will find, knock, and the door will be opened. If human parents, who in comparison to God are evil, know enough to give good gifts to their children, how much more will God give us...not whatever we want, not everything we ask for...but God will give us the Holy Spirit when we ask. Jesus' disciples wanted to follow him in the ways of God. He doesn't say that they will receive anything and everything they ask for, because they, and we, are not always good at discerning what faithful discipleship looks like. Sometimes we pray for that which will *not* help us live as God calls us to live. But praying for the strength, wisdom, and discernment of the Holy Spirit to help us fulfill our lives in Christ—that, Jesus promises, we will receive.

I don't know if it was right for me to pray to avoid a speeding ticket, though I'm real sure it was wrong for me to pray for the other guy to get pulled over. I'm thinking that in spite of my prayers, God did not micromanage that traffic enforcement that day anyway. But beyond Jesus teaching us what to pray for—the coming of God's kingdom, the manifestation of God's Spirit—Jesus teaches us how to pray—with persistence, with trust and confidence that God will give us the good gifts we need; Jesus invites us to keep on talking to God. If we can't find the words ourselves, we can use the words of Jesus; or for any occasion from praise and thanksgiving to despair and lament, we have 150 psalms to give us voice. Listen again to the words of the psalmist that we already prayed today: *When I called, you answered me; you increased my strength within me. You Lord are high, yet care for the lowly. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you keep me safe; your right hand shall save me. You will make good your purpose for me; O Lord, your steadfast love endures forever.* And indeed, it does.