

Trinity 12

I take as my text today, the collect for the 12th Sunday after Trinity:

Almighty and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we to pray, and art wont to give more than either we desire or deserve; Pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy; forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

If we go back to last week’s lesson for Morning Prayer from the 8th chapter of St. Paul’s letter to the Church at Rome, the subject of last week’s sermon, especially if we look at the 26th verse and the 10 following, we can see a connection to this week’s Collect, and a tenuous connection between the Epistle and Gospel. Maybe this should be your homework assignment!

To quote the 26th verse of Paul’s Letter to the Church at Rome:

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered.

St. Paul is pretty good at putting things in perspective and, in the passage from his Letter to the Romans, we find two aspects of our relationship with God that directly relate to our Collect for today: first, that because of our human frailty, we really don’t know what to ask for when we pray and second, that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

How wonderful it is to know that nothing in this world can ever separate us from God's love: nothing, not even death, for dying in Christ only brings us closer to him; just as He is risen, so we also rise with Him.

As long as Christ dwells in us and we in Him, we have nothing to fear.

Despite our shortcomings, human frailties and weaknesses of body and spirit, we have a Helper in the Holy Spirit. In Paul's words:

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought....

Yet, we should pray. Indeed, prayer is a centerpiece of our practice of religion; it is an essential part of the conduct of our personal spiritual life, as well as our corporate worship. It is our line of communication with God. It is an absolute necessity in our lives. At the same time, it is also very much misunderstood.

So, what do we mean by "prayer is misunderstood"? Well, there is a simple explanation — the presumption that prayer is basically all about us telling God what we want or need — then, of course, there is the broader explanation that examines all the complexities and mechanics of prayer.

In reality, prayer is a two-way communication between God and us in which we realize a deeper relationship with God and a better understanding of not only what we think we want and need but also in the process establish a spiritual connection with God that awakens in us his plan for us.

Today's Collect, when we take a closer look at it, brings this concept of prayer into better focus, giving us a better idea of just how instrumental prayer is in our relationship with God.

The Collect is a beautiful prayer dating back to about the 8th century, the original ending in the 1549 Prayer Book wording was closer to the Latin: *and giving unto us that our prayer dare not presume to ask* — a bit awkward, but the 1662 revision was much smoother and is reflected in our 1928 Book of Common Prayer.

This collect was also found in an earlier form in the 7th century:

O God of the heavenly powers, who bestowest more than we desire or deserve; grant, we beseech thee, that by thy mercy that may be conferred upon us which we have not the confidence in our merits to ask.

Still, the Collect for today is very similar to another one written by Archbishop Cranmer for the 1549 Prayer Book and found on page 49 of our Prayer Book:

ALMIGHTY God, the fountain of all wisdom, who knowest our necessities before we ask, and our ignorance in asking; We beseech thee to have compassion upon our infirmities; and those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask, vouchsafe to give us, for the worthiness of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

Now, you may wonder, why such detail and background of today's Collect.

Simply because this collect, in its evolution, consistently stresses three aspects of our relationship to God through prayer:

First, a *sense of unworthiness* which often deters us from prayer;

Second, that *God is always more ready to hear us than we are to pray*;

And, third, that God, all knowing, *is ready, in response to our prayers*, not only to forgive us our sins, but also to pour down upon us ***an abundance of mercy*** far exceeding our imagination.

The Collect, in addressing our sense of unworthiness, certainly strikes at the core of our humanity in our relationship with God. We are unworthy, indeed, and we confirm this unworthiness in many ways, perhaps most notably during each Celebration of the Eucharist, in the Prayer of Consecration, with the words, ***and although we are unworthy, through our manifold sins, to offer unto thee any sacrifice...***

In the Prayer of Humble Access, as we say together, ***We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy Table.***

And in the **Centurion's Prayer** which we say just before coming forward to receive the Communion, ***Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak the word only and my soul shall be healed.***

No doubt, we are not worthy; but that sense of unworthiness should not deter us from our obligation to pray. Indeed, not to pray is a violation of Spiritual Law, for prayer is a faculty of our created nature, and the means by which God releases His power into human life.

Aside from the feeling of unworthiness, why do we **not** pray?

There are probably dozens of reasons. However, I would venture that all the reasons could be boiled down to these three: *fear, ignorance, and laziness.*

First, *Fear!* Fear that our prayers will not be answered; fear that we will pray for the wrong things or wrong reasons; fear that our prayers might be answered in a way we won't like;

Second, *Ignorance!* that is, not knowing how to pray, for what to pray, or when to pray. Certainly, we are all quite guilty of feeling inadequate when it comes to the form of prayer, the words to use, how to formulate a prayer, and so forth. But, perhaps, more importantly, we simply don't know what to pray for; we are hindered because we cannot know what is best for us in the sight of God.

And Third, *Laziness*. We go to church on Sunday and that takes care of all the praying for the week, except, of course, when some momentous occasion arises. Or, perhaps, we are just so tired in the evenings and too rushed during the day.

More important than why we don't pray is why we should pray.

Foremost, it is part of our *Christian obligation or duty to worship God and to pray*, corporately and privately. Prayer is our way of keeping in touch with God, our way of telling Him our needs, as we strive to find out His will for us. Granted, He knows our needs far better than we do, but part of the beauty of God's relationship with us is His desire for us to communicate to Him what we perceive our needs to be.

As we mature in our spiritual life and develop in our relationship with God, we can begin to recognize for ourselves, through His grace, some of those things which are good for us. Most especially, we may come to realize that the object of our prayer life is to bring us into conformity with His Will. *Not my will, but thy Will be done.*

If we were to ask the question, what is prayer, we would get many different answers; but, there are several answers which should head the list.

- *Prayer is communion with God.* It is not that we don't enjoy communion with God through our corporate worship, but we also need to have communion on a personal level. That is where private prayer comes in to play, for as we learn the secret of prayer, we find ourselves coming into a closer communion with God; indeed, we find a two-way communication where prayer becomes for us a means of conversation with God as we learn to really listen through meditation.
- *Prayer is a natural desire of the soul.* In a sense, all our thoughts and desires are a kind of prayer, even our attitude toward God, and by focusing our thoughts and desires on God, we can realize the power that comes from prayer. Our whole lives can become a form of prayer.
- *Prayer is submission of self to the will of God.* When the disciples asked our Lord to teach them to pray, He gave them what we know as the ***Lord's Prayer***, in which we ask that God's Will be done on earth just as it is in heaven. We may also remember the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before the betrayal, where praying so intensely that His sweat was as droplets of blood, Jesus said ***Thy will be done.***
- *Prayer is a form of discipline.* It is not just something to be done on occasion, once-in-a-while, or whenever the spirit moves us; it is something that should be done every day, as when we rise in the morning and retire in the evening, as well as before meals. There are many devotional books to assist in the discipline of prayer. Of course, the ***Book of Common Prayer*** has ***Morning*** and ***Evening Prayer***, requisite for clergy, and, in the back of the Prayer Book, is the section on ***Family Prayer.***

Furthermore, in developing our relationship with God through prayer, we find that there are kinds of prayer: *adoration*, *confession*, *petition*, *intercession*, and *thanksgiving*, each describing relationships essential to our communion with God.

Adoration is the primary impulse of worship. We give ourselves to Him in love and honest admiration: we adore Him, the all sustaining God of love.

While we adore Him, we are also awed and humbled with a sense of our own unworthiness due to the frailty of our own human nature; thus, we come to realize ourselves for what we really are; we accept and acknowledge our words and actions which alienate us from God. We *confess* our sinfulness, pure and simple, as in the ***General Confession***:

We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time, most grievously have committed by thought, word, and deed, against Thy Divine Majesty....

We also acknowledge our dependence, as we *petition* God for ***those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul.***

In petitioning God, we are not presuming upon Him and reminding Him of our necessities, rather we are exercising and building a relationship with Him. Through prayer, we grow in knowledge of what is good for us and for what purposes He has in store for us.

When we *intercede* for others in our prayers, we are expressing that we have a responsibility to others, and, in so doing, we come to share in God's concern for all His creation.

And, in *thanksgiving*, we express our gratitude for all God's blessings and especially for our relationship with Him. We thank Him for all His *goodness and loving-kindness to us, and to all men....* and we also bless Him for *our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life...*

But most of all, we offer our praise and thanksgiving for the fact that He so loved us He became one of us, lived among us, suffered with us and for us so that we might have *the means of grace and the hope of glory.*

Thus, in the final analysis, prayer is an act of **love**. It is our responding to God's reconciling love for us and participating in a relationship with Him as we open our hearts and minds to him. This relationship is based on love and should be mutual — that is, we should respond to and return the love so freely given to us.

God is ever ready to give us more than we want or deserve; to pour upon us the abundance of His mercy; to forgive us; to bestow His blessings upon us regardless of our worthiness.

Here we are today, joining together as members of God's Holy Church, as members of a Family in Christ, in communion one with another, and in communion with God, offering not only praise and thanksgiving, but also intercession and confession.

As social creatures, we come together in corporate worship in his Church fulfilling God's design for us, obedient to our innate duty as creatures of God.

We come together confident in the promise of our Lord Jesus Christ that where two or three are gathered together in His Name, He will grant their requests.