



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, July 28, 2019**  
*Day Title*

*Choral Eucharist*  
*at 11:00 a.m.*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*  
*on*  
Luke 11:1-13  
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### **The Soul in Paraphrase**

I struggle with prayer. With verbal prayer, anyway. Whether it is in public or one on one with someone or in the private of my own apartment, I often struggle to find the right words when I pray. I feel awkward and a little silly. Faltering. Like a little kid riding a bike for the first time. Now that may sound like a problem a priest shouldn't have. But I feel uncomfortable just talking with God. I fumble about with the language of prayer.

I blame the Book of Common Prayer. For some of this, anyway.

We have been given by Thomas Cranmer and our Anglican forebears what's maybe the single most beautiful and spiritually profound volume of written down prayers in the history of Christianity. And every week we hear its majestic words resound throughout this magnificent space - services loaded up with transcendent language and then shot through with gorgeous choral and organ music and accompanied by beautiful vestments and flowers and stained glass.

And so we get it built up in our head, or at least I do, consciously or unconsciously, that THIS is what our prayer should be like, should sound like. It should have that near-Shakespearean cadence or that perfectly balanced Collect structure. It should echo profound Scriptural and theological themes and address our Lord with poetry and pithy phrasing. It should be beautiful and elegant. It should be worthy of our worship.

And so I compare my stuttering, staggering attempts at verbal prayer to the excellent compositions in the Prayer Book. And they fall down each and every time. The Prayer Book elevates the English language and points it at God. Me, I feel lucky if I can string together a sentence that agrees with itself grammatically.

"Teach us to pray," the disciples ask Jesus in today's story from Luke's Gospel. They have seen him praying and, perhaps moved by how well he does it, by his seemingly close union with God, they ask Jesus. "Teach us to pray."

And so Jesus gives them the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father. That most familiar of Christian prayers. And on the surface this prayer looks very much like a Book of Common Prayer prayer. Elegant. Beautiful. Well said. And it is!

But it is also, I think, a schematic for our ordinary, daily prayer life that draws attention to what ultimately matters most. To what's most important in praying - for us and to God.

In Matthew's Gospel, in Chapter 6, Jesus has some strong words about what we might call performative piety. Piety that draws attention to itself. He calls out those religious folks in his day who would pray long and verbose prayers and who would make themselves look dismal when they fasted and who would make a big show out of giving alms to those in need. No, Jesus said, God doesn't want you to show off your piety. Instead, he commands, when you pray: go into a private place and close the door and pray there. And pray with these simple words. And there, in Matthew's Gospel, there and then he gave them the Our Father. This intimate prayer between a soul and God.

The Our Father is a schematic for that sort of intimate prayer. It answers the disciples' request of Jesus to teach them how to pray. It shows us, very practically, how we might pray.

Walking through it we find the major themes of prayer. It is teaching us by its very form. Look at the first line: The Lord's Prayer addresses God both intimately in parental, familial language (as Father), majestically, and with reverence (who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name).

The prayer then places our lives and our world in the context of the Kingdom of God and begs that we discern how the living of our days lines up with that Kingdom. It asks us to pause and contemplate how our lives reflect God's priorities. How our stories fit with God's story (thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven).

We then, in praying this way, ask for that which we actually need, materially and spiritually, for the living out of our days. Strength to do the work we are given to do, help with anxiety or grief or mounting bills, health for your aunt whose cancer has returned, one more day of sobriety (give us this day our daily bread).

We then ask forgiveness for the places we've failed and fallen short and in so doing we are made aware of the relational nature of life, the need for good relationships. And the need to make amends and to forgive (forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us).

And finally we ask for grace to choose good and not evil and to face the struggle with temptation and trial that awaits us, sure of God's help (lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.).

It is a school of prayer, a curriculum for prayer grounded in our everyday life.

"Our prayer must involve the whole of our own being," Archbishop Rowan Williams writes.

The Our Father does exactly that. In its phrases and sections, it addresses the stuff of our life in the light of God - our material and spiritual needs and struggles. In its general and spacious language, room is cleared for us to reflect on and draw forth our own particular petitions in the areas it lays out. And, as a schematic for our prayer life, it draws our attention to what is most important. Praying out of our days. Out of our concerns. Aligning our concerns with God's concerns, our story with God's story.

That great Anglican poet George Herbert calls prayer, "The soul in paraphrase, the heart in pilgrimage..."

Because prayer isn't first of all about language at all. It is about life. The heart and the soul should be at the very core of our prayer. It's why Jesus addresses God as Father. It bespeaks intimacy. Love. Relationship. God surely appreciates reverence and beautiful words, words filled with Scriptural allusions and depth of spiritual formation but I am almost entirely sure that God more appreciates our halting, imperfect and yet honest expressions of what's in our hearts. Our struggles and our gratitude, our pain and our joy.

As it says in the First Book of Samuel, “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

God is profoundly interested in our hearts, friends. In the prayerful pilgrimage of our hearts, as Herbert says, towards God and the high calling of our lives. God is profoundly interested in our desires and our hopes and dreams. And also in our places of sin and darkness, pain and difficulty. God is concerned with the matters of our actual hearts, our actual lives. The language used is secondary.

This is not to say that the poetry and beauty of our liturgical or devotional language is misplaced or wrong or akin to the kind of performative piety that Jesus denounced. Although it can be. We can worship the form, the symbol, and not that which it points to. Worshipping the worship is a REAL temptation for us, gifted as we are with such treasure. But of course God loves beauty. God created beauty. And it is a noble aspiration to, as this place does, strive to give our very best to God. Public worship gathers up all our private prayers and enshrines them in beauty.

I am comforted in my own anxieties about verbal prayer by returning to this prayer that Jesus taught us and finding in it a road map to a kind of prayer that I know I can do. That we all can do. And that map, that blueprint, leads me to attempt to pray about the issues of my life as it is right now today. And to try to worry less about the wording.

For I would argue, no offense to the Prayer Book, that the prayers which God finds most beautiful are not necessarily elegant or well phrased, at all. They are honest. They come from where we are. And sometimes they are entirely wordless. A keening cry of anguish from the heart, a gasp of astonishment and wonder, a laughing expression of joy and thanksgiving...God hears and loves those prayers perhaps most of all.

Writer Ann Lamott says there are really only two basic prayers and they are: “Help me help me help me” and “Thank you thank you thank you.”

And all of us can pray those. From the stuff of our days to the eternity beyond, from the depths of our hearts to the heart of God.

Prayer is the heart in pilgrimage.

The soul in paraphrase.