

The Lord's Prayer

Draw Near with Persistence

One of Jesus' disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

—Luke 11:1

In the Gospel according to Saint Luke, Jesus calls his followers over and over to draw near. On his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem he invites one person after another to draw near and follow him. He commends the Good Samaritan for drawing near to his neighbor and acting with God's compassion and mercy. Jesus praises Mary for drawing near to spend quality time with him, while Martha struggles with worry and the distraction of busyness.^{xv}

Saint Luke also records how Jesus practices what he preaches—drawing near to his heavenly Father in prayer. And then Jesus' disciples finally ask him to show them how to draw

near to God. “Lord, teach us to pray!” they ask (Luke 11:1). Those of us who follow Jesus still ask this same question, don’t we? *Lord, teach us to pray! Give us the right words to say. Show us how to draw near to God!*

And now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say,

People and Celebrant

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

—The service for Holy Communion continues
on page 364 of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Jesus could give his disciples any of the words from the Jewish “book of common prayer,” otherwise known as the Psalms.

Instead, he gives them something new. We call it the Lord's Prayer.

“Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our
sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

—Luke 11:2-4

The Lord's Prayer is an expression of our desire to draw near to God and our desire for God to draw near to us. Notice where this prayer is offered^{xvi} during Holy Communion—right before we draw near to God's table to be fed and sustained with Christ's presence in the sacrament of bread and wine. Since about 400 years after the birth of Christ, this prayer has been a devotion intended to prepare people to receive the sacrament. Indeed, the earliest Christians identified the “daily bread” petition in the Lord's Prayer with the bread of eucharist.

If you want to witness a miracle, draw near to someone who is approaching their last breath and begin praying the Lord's Prayer. People who have followed Jesus throughout their life—even if they lack the strength to open their eyes, squeeze your hand, or say a word—often join in praying the Lord's Prayer or at least moving their lips to its cadence: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...”

Prayer is how we draw nearer to God and express our desire for God to draw near to us. When we can't figure out what to say in our prayers, we can use these words that Jesus taught us. When parents want to teach their children to pray but can't decide how to begin, they can show up at their bedside and use these words that Jesus taught us. When adult children are

caring for a sick or dying parent but can't figure out what to pray, they can draw near to their bedside and use these words that Jesus taught us.

Jesus has given us words to express our heart's desire to draw near to our Father in heaven. They are not magic words. They don't cast a spell. They help us express our desire for God and God's desire for us.

We express this desire with all the forms of prayer condensed into one. We first express our desire with adoration and praise (hallowed be your name), then with intercession for all (your will be done on earth as in heaven), with petition for ourselves (give us today our daily bread), with the confession we need to make (forgive us), and with the oblation we need to give (as we forgive). Only Jesus could craft the perfect prayer.

But of course, Jesus gives us more than just words. He also coaches his disciples (and that includes us!) to be persistent in prayer. It is easy to become men and women—even priests—on a mission and miss the opportunity to draw near (like the Good Samaritan) and help God's kingdom come and God's will be done on earth as in heaven. It is easy to become busy and distracted like Martha, working to put food on the table, and miss the opportunity to draw near (like Mary) and trust God to give us this day our daily bread. It is easy to make excuses for why it's not a good time to follow Jesus and miss an opportunity to draw near and trust that God will deliver us from evil, even on the dangerous, difficult, or lonely paths we sometimes travel.



I once walked one of these difficult paths through the Annapurna Range of the Himalayan Mountains. For several days I trekked alone, up and down thousands of stepping stones that had been laid by hand across those mountains for generations. I learned about this trail from a stranger I met in India the month before. I don't remember his name, but he looked like Jesus (or at least how I envision Jesus—you know what I mean—olive skin, handsome face, long flowing hair, and a full beard.)

The man described an amazing journey on this mountain range and urged me to give it a try. Just like Jesus encouraged his followers about prayer, this man described an amazing experience of nearness to God and exhorted me to be persistent in pursuing it: “Search, and you will find.”

The man pointed his finger at a tattered map and traced a path by which I could move from one village to the next, arriving each night at a safe place to sleep before sundown. I expressed my doubts and uncertainty about finding safe food and lodging. Like Jesus coaching his disciples about prayer, he encouraged me to try: “Ask, and it will be given you.”

“There's one exception,” he pointed out. “There's a place called Poon Hill, and it's a little more than a day's walk, but it is oh so worth it. So, wake up early and hit the trail out of Ulleri village. Pick up your pace and keep walking. Be persistent!”

He ignored my sigh of resignation and kept talking. “There will be a sign on the pathway. Trust it. Follow it. And climb the hill. At the top of the hill is a small house. The family is really nice. They welcome hikers who need a hot meal and a warm place to sleep.” Like Jesus urging those of us who want

to believe the promise, he said, “Knock, and the door will be opened for you.”

Do you have mixed feelings about drawing near to God? You’re in good company since most of the people in the Bible experienced these same feelings. Do you have doubts about whether you can walk this path alone? You’re in good company: The church is filled with people who choose to walk together on this journey of faith.

Do you find it hard to be persistent in prayer when your health keeps declining, when you can’t find a job, or when death claims a loved one? Do you find that you have done everything in your power to solve a problem, mend a relationship, or help a friend or family member, and there is nothing else you can do but ask God to intervene?

Jesus urges those of us who follow him to be persistent in our prayer: “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Luke 11:9).

The day I walked toward Poon Hill was cloudy and foggy. I could see anywhere from five steps to 100 yards in front of me, but the mountains were completely hidden from view. I tried to keep a quick, steady pace throughout the day, but because of the thick clouds, darkness was falling when I finally found the promised sign.

I knew I could turn back toward Ghorepani village and find a guest house without much effort or worry. What I did not know was how long it would take to press on and climb the last, snow-covered hill. All I could remember was the voice of the stranger who reminded me of Jesus: “Be persistent. Search and you will find.”

So I climbed into the darkness—exhausted, cold, and afraid. Eventually, just as promised, a solitary shack stood at the top of Poon Hill. I could see the warm glow of a fire piercing tiny gaps between the boards of the door. A few sparks rose out of the makeshift chimney.

I knocked, and the door opened. An old man answered with a smile as if he had been waiting for my arrival all day. “Namaste,” he greeted with a bow. “Namaste,” I replied with tears in my eyes.

He pointed to a place where I could spread out my sleeping bag and then handed me a plate of hot food, including—and I am not making this up—a slice of freshly baked apple pie. Like the Good Samaritan, he was a compassionate and merciful neighbor to me. He was, literally, a perfect stranger.

The next morning, the light of dawn pierced through the boards of the wall near my face. Even from the tiny sliver of light, I could see it was a clear morning. I pulled on my boots, threw a blanket around my shoulders and ran outside to discover that I was surrounded by peaks rising upwards of 26,000 feet—a crystal clear, jagged horizon.

Just below the top of the hill on which I was standing was a soft bed of clouds pushed by strong winds in a swirling pattern. It was as if I stood upon the still point—the axis—a thin place where heaven and earth meet. With the help of perfect strangers, I discovered a joyful place to draw near to God and give thanks.

Jesus is calling us to draw near and trust. Fear not. Be persistent. Our Father in heaven will bring us, with all the saints, into the joy of the eternal kingdom. And this is precisely

what we ask through Jesus Christ—by him, and with him, and in him—when we pray with the words he taught us.

These are not magic words, but they are sacred words. Moreover, they are sturdy enough to last us a lifetime. Our Lord's Prayer enables us, even with our dying breath, to express the most basic and important things we need to say to our Father in heaven. This prayer helps us to draw near to the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Reflecting on Our Story with God

- ❖ When have perfect strangers encouraged or helped you discover the joy of God's beauty, goodness, or truth?
- ❖ Think of a time you were persistent. In what ways were you challenged? In what ways were you blessed?
- ❖ When have you been a perfect stranger by drawing near to someone in need?

Celebrating Our Story with God

- ❖ If possible, plan a safe but challenging journey that stretches your familiar comfort zone. If this is not physically or financially possible, then journey vicariously through other peoples' stories or pictures.
- ❖ With a little persistence, any of us can draw near to God and to our neighbors—even those we have never met. Whether you bake apple pies or express your love through other gifts, find a new (or old) neighbor to bless.