

Pentecost 7 Sermon
July 24, 2022
Eric Rennie

GIMME! THANKS! OOPS! WOW! SHH!

In today's Gospel reading from Luke, one of Jesus's disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." This is a sermon about prayer. I call it "Gimme! Thanks! Oops! Wow! Shh!" with an exclamation point after each word. The reason for my title will soon become clear.

I claim no particular expertise on the subject of prayer, even though I've practiced most forms of prayer at one time or another in my life: prayers of supplication, intercession, praise, thanksgiving, confession and contemplation. I've chanted the so-called Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.") I've prayed in tongues. (I'm not sure what category that falls into.) The only kind I haven't practiced is exorcism, although I've been tempted on a few occasions.

In an article on prayer in the *New York Times Magazine*, Rabbi Marc Gellman said there were four basic types of prayer: Gimme! Thanks! Oops! and Wow!* Hence the title of my sermon, with one important addition that I will come to. The rabbi was undoubtedly correct that these four categories cover pretty much all of what passes for prayer among the faithful. But, forgive me, a lot of it is kid's stuff, especially prayers of the first type, "gimme" prayers, which probably account for most of the praying that goes on. By kid's stuff, I mean they are prayers you would expect from those who, like small children, feel utterly dependent on God to give them everything they want or need in life. Since we all owe God our life, it's not surprising we should harbor such sentiments.

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But how many of us move beyond them to a more mature understanding – as St. Paul would have it, to “put away childish things?” Too often we pray as if we’re supplicants in the court of the Emerald City, hoping against hope that the Great and Terrible Oz will grant our requests. Our prayers are routinely based on false premises. We confuse wish fulfillment with prayer. Mistaking wants for needs, we pray as if something were lacking. If nothing is lacking, we pray because we’re afraid it soon might be. Much of the time, our prayers are nothing but fear addressed to a higher power.

I’ll give you an example. My younger son Aaron recently quit his job. He was a senior editor at Dow Jones in New York, the company that publishes the *Wall Street Journal*. Dow Jones recently required its employees to return to the office after two years of working remotely due to COVID. In the interim, Aaron moved to Florida so he can be near our granddaughter, and the company had refused to make an exception in his case. I doubt he’s praying about this situation, but I am. I’m his dad, after all. You never stop worrying about your kids, no matter how old they are, even when they’re perfectly capable of taking care of themselves.

I admit my prayer is probably fear addressed to a high power. Do I imagine that God doesn’t know what is needed in such situations? Did Jesus not say, “Your father knows what you need before you ask him”? In which case, what do we have to fear?

And if God granted every request, where would we be? Our favorite team would never lose. We'd always get the girl, find the job, win the lottery. No loved one would ever die. It sounds like heaven until you really think about it. In a classic *Twilight Zone* episode, a gambler named Rocky Valentine dies and goes to a place where he can't lose. At first he is overjoyed but then eventually grows bored with his unending string of lucky breaks. "I don't belong in heaven, see," he finally tells his guardian angel. "I want to go to the other place." His companion reacts with mock surprise. "Heaven? What ever gave you the idea you were in heaven, Mr. Valentine? This is the other place. "

Mark Twain, who was unburdened by religious belief, saw the implications only too clearly. "If you would beseech a blessing upon yourself, beware! lest without intent you invoke a curse upon a neighbor at the same time," he wrote. "If you pray for the blessing of rain upon your crop which needs it, by that act you are possibly praying for a curse upon some neighbor's crop which may not need rain and can be injured by it." In the midst of America's bloodiest conflict, Abraham Lincoln observed that God cannot possibly answer the prayers of both sides when each invokes his aid against the other. "The Almighty has His own purposes," Twain concluded. Indeed.

Our problem comes in thinking that by pious wheedling we can bend God's will to our own. I know that is the clear implication of this morning's Gospel reading, but I still think it's kid stuff. However, it's not clear to me that we can even have a will distinct from the will of God. Only theologians well-practiced in the art of the impossible can reconcile the notion of free will with the sovereignty of God. God is God — assuming there is one — in which case there can only be one. A rooster may think his crowing causes the sun to rise, but that does not make it so, any more than the earth turns by its own volition.

On the final night of his life, Jesus went with a few of his disciples to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. He told his friends, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.” Knowing that he would soon be taken away and killed, he prayed that “this cup might pass from me.” But then he added, “If this cannot pass unless I drink it, thy will be done.” This was not a classic “Gimme!” prayer, or any other type of prayer Rabbi Gellman mentioned. It is a prayer of surrender, and it is unquestionably a grown-up prayer. There are echoes in this of the Lord’s Prayer, in which Jesus instructs his followers to pray, “Thy will be done.” And if we truly understand the implication of these words, what more needs to be said?

This brings us to an altogether different type of prayer that does not really lend itself to exclamation points or, for that matter, to words. In keeping with Rabbi Gellman’s categories, however, we might classify this one as a “Shh!” prayer. Contemplative prayer, as it is called, was first practiced in the Western tradition by the Desert Fathers, who fled into the wilderness in the fourth century seeking a direct encounter with God. The fruits of this encounter were perhaps best described by the psychologist William James, who wrote that “the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God.” Such prayer has no object and seeks no outcome, leading to what the 14th-century German mystic Meister Eckhart described as “living without a why.” For Eckhart, contemplative prayer was “glorying in pure being.”

Eckhart’s method of prayer was simplicity itself, and yet it requires you to abandon all intention, including the desire to find God. “This above all else is needful,” Eckhart said, “you must lay claim to nothing! Let go of yourself and let God act with you and in you as He will. This work is His, this birth is His, in fact, every single thing you are; for you have abandoned self, and have gone out of your soul’s powers and their activities; gone beyond your personal nature.” To let go and let God, in other words.

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So where does that leave those of us who sometimes fret and fuss and worry that God might overlook our needs if we don't constantly remind him? Kids' stuff it may be, but did any of us ever really stop being a kid, deep down? And what did we do as kids when we got hurt or got overwhelmed by some circumstance in life? Didn't we run crying to our nearest parent? And even as grownups don't we sometimes still run to our heavenly parent? At such times, we must listen very carefully. And if we can quiet our fears and doubts, even for a moment, we might hear not words exactly but something that sounds a lot like "Shh!"

Amen.