

Why do you think it's so easy for us to identify with Jesus' first disciples?
Isn't it because the disciples are so human?

In the Gospels they are certainly not portrayed as superheroes. They don't always get things right. Sometimes they ask the wrong question, or fall short because of pride or lack of faith.

Remember the time Jesus' disciples were arguing over the question:
"Who among us will be the greatest?"

Or do you remember when James and John were asking if they could sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in His glory?

Or when Peter came to Jesus and asked him, "How many times do I really have to forgive my brother when He sins against me?"

In each of these cases, instead of being impatient, Jesus listened and took the opportunity to teach them.

Surprisingly in today's Gospel, the disciples actually get something right. When they came to Jesus and honestly admitted, "We don't know how to pray."
"Lord, would you teach us to pray?"

Jesus must have rejoiced, because this is one of the most important questions they could ever ask. And so in today's sermon, I'm going to concentrate on this question, "How do we learn to pray?" because it's also one of the most important questions we could ever ask.

So, first of all, let me just say a few words about what prayer is: Prayer is faith breathing.

There is a good illustration of what I mean by faith breathing.

A couple of experienced hikers once took a vacation near Estes Park, Colorado. They found a good trail and began one morning soon after breakfast. Now before long, even though they had been training at home by taking long walks, they noticed that their legs were tiring.

Breathing hard, they began increasing their effort yet soon found that they were getting light-headed and had to stop. At first they were puzzled, but then they realized they were experiencing the affects of high altitude. Unable to take in enough oxygen from the thinner air, they were left panting, dizzy, and tired.

In the same way, Christian faith, without prayer, becomes tired, weak, and eventually dies,

because prayer is the breathing of faith. The dialog of prayer, listening and speaking to God, is faith breathing – inhaling and exhaling.¹

So, in other words, we need to pray because like oxygen, we can't truly live without it. Our connection with Jesus, and the life that we receive from him, is nurtured and sustained through prayer.

Secondly, we need to pray, because that's how God gives us strength to face life's trials and temptations.

Life is always full of risks and dangers.
We have all seen the frailties and insecurities of life.

On top of that, as Christians, we believe that we are called to a life of service and self-sacrifice.

Being a Christian sometimes involves conflict.
Standing up for what you believe in often carries a cost.

The challenge to our beliefs may occur at work or at school.
The challenge to your faith may happen when we are with a group of old friends who do some things you no longer believe are right. Our beliefs and our values can be challenged anywhere.

That's why we need the strength that the Holy Spirit gives us through prayer.
Jesus' disciples knew this to be true. They saw prayer as the way in which Jesus' drew his strength from God.

And yet isn't it interesting that the disciples needed to learn how to pray.

Aren't we the same way?

We know prayer is the oxygen of Christian life.
We know we need prayer.
And yet, we know that we don't pray as we ought. We all in one way or another struggle with prayer.

And so, just like Jesus' disciples we can acknowledge our shortcomings and say, "Lord teach us to pray."

When the disciples asked Jesus about prayer, he did not tell them to go off and sit quietly until something spiritual came to their minds. He said, "Pray like this, 'Our Father...who art in Heaven.'"

¹ *Teach Us to Pray: Overcoming Obstacles to Daily Prayer* Bradley Hanson, Augsburg 1990.

This prayer, “The Lord’s Prayer”, is a gift. It’s a pathway to prayer.

One of the most difficult aspects of meeting new people is not knowing what to say at first.

How should we address them?

What subject should we bring up first?

In giving us this prayer, Jesus has not left us wondering what to say.

We don’t need to flail around, trying to think up something to say to God.

We are simply invited to pray these words, in faith.

Ultimately, this prayer that Jesus taught us, connects us with God because we don’t choose it. It chooses us. It reaches out to us, forms us, invites us into the adventure called discipleship - an adventure that we are not called to walk alone. To be a Christian is to be surrounded by a faith, and a people of faith who teach us how to pray. That’s how I learned how to pray.

I can remember my first awkward attempts at praying out loud.

Around our family table, at Bible camp and in my high school youth group,

I heard others pray, I heard the prayers in worship, and slowly learned how to put some words together and pray out loud.

I learned how to go beyond my “911” prayers...the kind I only prayed in emergencies, like when I needed help on a test, or when I was afraid.

By listening to my brothers and sisters in faith

I learned how to go beyond my “Calling Collect” prayers...the kind that focused only on my needs or wants.

As I learned what Jesus taught us in the Lord’s Prayer, my prayers began to focus on the needs of others, not just my own.

Later, while I was in seminary,

I learned an old Latin phrase that explains how we learn to pray.

The phrase is “Lex orandi, lex credandi.”

And literally it means, “the way we worship, is the way we believe.”

It works backwards too:

“What we believe shapes the way we pray or worship.”

In other words, I learned to pray as I grew up and learned more about Jesus. And the more my faith grew, the more I learned to pray.

Many years ago, I saw a TV episode of “Touched By an Angel”

where a man was dying, and Andrew went to be with him.

Usually, people recognized Andrew as an angel, but this time, the man didn’t.

Later, explaining what had happened, Andrew told Monica, “How can a person suddenly expect to recognize God, when they’ve spent their whole life ignoring Him.”

Knowing God is the most important thing in life. And Jesus teaches us that prayer is the means by which we can know God. In the dialog of listening and speaking we hear His Word and respond with our whole lives.

I’d like to close by sharing a powerful story with you from the author C.S. Lewis. Listen, to what prayer meant to him, during the time his wife was dying of cancer:

In a scene from *Shadowlands*, a film based on his life, Lewis has just returned to Oxford from London, where he has just married Joy Gresham, an American woman, in a private Episcopal ceremony, performed at her bedside. She is dying from cancer and through the struggle with her illness, she and Lewis have been discovering the depth of their love for each other.

As Lewis arrives at the college where he teaches, he is met by Harry Harrington, an Episcopal priest, who asks what news there is. Lewis hesitates; then, deciding to speak of the marriage and not the cancer, he says, ‘Ah, good news, I think, Harry. Yes good news.’

“Harrington, not aware of the marriage and thinking that Lewis is referring to Joy’s medical condition, replies, ‘I know how hard you’ve been praying, God must be answering your prayer.’

“That’s not why I pray, Harry,’ Lewis responds.

‘I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I’m helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn’t change God, it changes *me*.’

“Prayer is not a message scribbled on a note, jammed in a bottle and tossed into the sea in hopes that it will wash up someday on God’s shoreline. Prayer is communion with God.

We speak to God, but God touches, embraces, shapes, and changes us. Whether we pray for rain or pray for sunshine, our prayer is answered, because in the act of praying we receive the gift we really seek— communion with God, intimacy with God.”²

I pray that each of you here today, may know this gift, the gift of prayer, the gift of communion with God, the gift of faith-breathing. Amen

² Thomas G. Long *Whispering the Lyrics: Sermons for Lent and Easter*, Lima, Ohio: CSS Publ. Co., 1995