

## The Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time July 24, 2022

What do all religions have in common? We could probably agree that all religions have belief in some kind of god and a way of connecting with that god. It is in our human nature to want to go beyond ourselves, to reach out to something greater than ourselves. Religion is the way we do that.

As Christians, we have an advantage. The God our hearts long for has actually revealed Himself to us. He became human in Jesus Christ. While all religions have some kind of an idea of a god that they try to make sense of, we believe in a God who has reached out to us.

So, when the disciples in today's gospel ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, they are asking God Himself how they should pray. So, if we, like those disciples, truly want to know how to pray - truly want to know how to reach out to this God whom our hearts long to connect with - then we should pay close attention to Jesus' answer. Not only should we listen to the words that Jesus teaches us but also the meaning behind those words.

The first word of the prayer is key to understanding the whole prayer. Jesus invites us to address God as "Father". We don't call Him "Supreme Being", "Higher Power", or even simply "God". Jesus tells us specifically to call God "Father".

So, when we approach God in prayer, we must approach Him as children would approach their father. We come to Him confident that He will hear us. Because He is a good Father, we can go to God and know that He

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will welcome us as His children. He never turns away anyone who comes to Him. No matter how small our problems might seem to us, He takes the time to listen and answer us. No matter how sinful we might judge ourselves to be, He will always run out to meet us when we turn toward Him. More than anything else, this is what Jesus wants us to understand about our Heavenly Father - that He loves us as His dear children and that He is always ready to answer us.

Jesus speaks to this at the end of today's gospel. Our Heavenly Father is good and knows how to give us good things. He knows what is best for us and is eager to give us whatever we need. If He has not answered our prayers, it is either because what we are asking for is not good for us or that it is not the right time to give it to us. But Jesus tells us to keep on asking like children in the back seat of a car during a trip asking their parents, "Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" God does not get annoyed when we keep asking Him for the same things over and over again. In fact, He delights in our faith and is pleased by our persistence. It shows Him that we really believe that He hears us and that He will provide for us.

Many times, people avoid praying because they don't know what to say. This is understandable. What could any of us possibly have to say to the God who created the world with all its wonders? The fact is that we don't have to impress God with our words or somehow try to get His attention. We already have His full attention. He knows what we need before we even ask. It pleases Him that we make the attempt to pray, even when the words do not come easily to us and when it seems as though we're getting nowhere.

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We can understand how true this is when we think about how parents treat their young children. When children are just learning to talk, we don't correct their grammar or tell them they are using the wrong words. Rather, we can't help thinking how cute they are. Even though they're not speaking in full sentences, we still marvel at how smart they are. We wonder how they came up with the words they're saying and how they learned to put it all together.

The same is true with our prayer. God isn't sitting in Heaven shaking His head because we're getting it all wrong. No. Instead He is thinking about how cute and clever we are. That is because He loves us as His dear children.

Children learn by imitating their parents. Young boys often say that they want to be just like their fathers when they grow up and young girls say the same about their mothers. In the same way, as God's children, we should want to imitate our Heavenly Father. If we understand Him as a loving Father who cares for all His children, then we should want to be people who love and care for others too. We should treat each other as brothers and sisters, no matter how different we may be, because we have the same Heavenly Father who loves us all.

That is why Jesus teaches us to pray, "forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us." If we understand that God is a forgiving Father, we will naturally extend forgiveness to those who have hurt us. This is especially true the more we come to understand that we are all brothers and sisters.

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Abraham gives us an example of this in today's first reading. There is no reason Abraham should be concerned with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. They weren't his people and he knew the reputation of those cities. But he also knew that God would not punish the innocent along with the wicked. He knew that God would rather tolerate wickedness than allow one innocent person to perish. That is why Abraham pleads with God so persistently for those cities. Not because Abraham cared for the cities as much as because He knew the heart of God.

That is why we never give up praying for those who hurt us. We want to bring into this world something of the love and goodness of our Heavenly Father. We want to be like Him in the way that we treat others. We have received nothing but good things from Him. So, we want to give nothing but good things to others. We have received nothing but love from Him. So, we want to give nothing but love to others. We have received nothing but forgiveness from Him. So, we want to give nothing but forgiveness to others. If we do otherwise, then how can we call ourselves God's children?