

Here and there this summer I have been preaching on the topic of spiritual formation. In your bulletin this morning you will find, once again, a survey that invites you to think about what these words mean to you. Spiritual. Formation. Those who want to be more physically fit make a plan to eat, rest, and exercise their limbs and muscles better. Those who want to be more mentally fit will go to the library and read up on an important topic, or they'll start doing crossword puzzles every morning to keep the brain fine-tuned and alert. They'll join discussion groups that will challenge their thinking and enlarge their perspective. Likewise, if we want to be spiritually fit, then we must consider what that requires of us.

Now it's fair to say that spiritual formation is not a requirement for anything. Back to the physical fitness metaphor. If one wants to run a race, one is not required to lose 25 pounds or train even one day in advance. If you want to go right from the couch to the starting line, you can. However, you may not finish the race. Or, having finished the race, you might not remember more than the cramps and the dehydration and collapsing at the finish line. And the point will hardly have been physical fitness, but physical exhaustion. So it is with spiritual formation. One is not required to be spiritually fit. In fact, one doesn't even have to be spiritual. Taking it one step further, one doesn't even have to believe in the existence of the spiritual. Like the Stoics who believe in the power of the physical to overcome the emotional, one can live trying to minimize and even block out those parts of us that are spiritual.

If, on the other hand, we are going to speak of the spiritual, and be spiritually formed, we ought to know what we're talking about, and how to become it. Over the past many weeks, I have tried to show that while being spiritual and being religious are not the same thing (otherwise wouldn't we call them by the same name?), and that while there is, what appears to be, a growing interest among younger generations in the spiritual over the religious, the two have a deep and abiding need for one another. If spirituality wakes us up to the truth of who we are as beloved children of God, religion, at its best, shows us that any love worth having is a love worth sharing. And few passages of scripture have ever done so much both to convince us of this truth and to teach us how to live by it as the Lord's Prayer.

For a prayer that has become such a part of the Christian life—showing up in nearly every church service of our lives—baptisms, weddings, funerals, Christmas, the night before Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving—we might be surprised to discover that it appears in only 2 of the 4 gospels, and that it is not part of any major moment in time. In both Matthew and Luke, the Lord’s Prayer comes as part of a larger sermon being delivered by Jesus to his disciples not long after he has called each of them to be his disciple. In Matthew, the sermon takes place on the top of a hill; in Luke, out in the middle of an open plain. In both instances, the location is key because for days now the disciples and Jesus have been dogged by a crowd of needy people. Beggars looking for food; mothers with snot-faced kids looking for a doctor; the religiously and spiritually disenfranchised looking for a preacher who doesn’t look like an empty suit; people who have been crippled by the amount of bad news in the world, all looking for some good news. Up until recently, the disciples were feeling pretty good about their ability to meet the needs of this crowd. But now they’ve handed out their last tissue, cut up the last of their bread, and said all the prayers they know how to say, and still the crowd keeps coming. So, they’ve gone up a hill and out into the middle of nowhere to try and get away. There, the disciples have Jesus all to themselves. They are, at one and the same time, both full and empty. They are full in that way you get when you feel like you’ve been out there on the front lines making a difference. They are full of importance, full at being noticed, full of vim and vigor. I mean, not too many hours ago Jesus came by and said to each of them, “Hey Matthew, I’d like *you* to come and follow me. Hey Bartholomew, I’d like *you* to come and follow me.” So Matthew left his tax booth behind and Bartholomew dropped his fishing net, and now they’re out on the front lines making a difference! Only Jesus is concerned they might be getting the wrong idea, that they might be mistaking power with position, and influence with importance. “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”

The John they are referring to is John the Baptist. As far as we know, there is no record anywhere of how he taught his disciples to pray. What we do know is that in 1st century Palestine, a lot of people thought John was the long-awaited Messiah, because John had shown himself to not be afraid to stand up to the oppressive powers of Rome. “Are you the one who is going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” people asked him. “Will you take down the enemy, give us back our land and soil, and run up the flag?” John, of course, never

did any such thing. He never claimed to be God's great gift to the world. Rather, he told his disciples to look for God to give to the world someone far greater than him. And when, on the day John saw Jesus go by for the first time, John said, "There. That's the one you've been looking for."

We have to wonder then what the disciples think Jesus is going to say when they ask him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." Here they are, sitting with the one who really can give them back the keys to the kingdom. The one of whom John said, Behold! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. "He's on our side! He's on our side! "Lord, teach us to pray."

*"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."*

It's a shorter prayer than the one we're used to praying together on Sunday mornings. In this prayer, there is no "Our Father who art in heaven." And because there is no father in heaven, there is also no "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Because Jesus—in teaching his disciples to pray—is wanting to create a counter-narrative to the one the disciples are currently living in. That world, the one they are living in, is a world of imperialism, where the tyrant king of Rome rules their lives from far-away. Though they've never seen the king, they feel and fear his judgement every day. He's like an abusive father who could come home at any moment and blow the door down. In that world, there is a great, great distance between the rich, who have stored up so much food and money that they will never have to go a day without, and the poor, who will never be able to catch up with the rich. In that world, competition takes center stage. There is no room for mutual care, for shared dependence. The ones at the top are not interested in what their way of living is doing to the ones at the bottom. Likewise, the ones at the bottom do not care about the ones at the top. They have no concern for their neighbors on the other side of town, and for what happens to the soul when we have accumulated more stuff than we need. In that world, there is no thought of what we could learn from one another. There is no compassion. There is only that last great deadly sin, the one that says, "I don't care."

Contrast that world, though, with the one we get when we pray like Jesus. “Father, hallowed be your name. Because we are made in your image. We bear your name. That means when we say David, when we say Piper, Perry, Deb, we are speaking of you, and of things you love, O God. And when we speak of one another in love, everything changes. Yes, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come. That kingdom not in some heaven far away, but the one that comes to us like daily bread. The one we can break apart and pass around. That kingdom where we are given no more than we can hold and no less than we need. Give us that kingdom.

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to trial. Some talk of trespasses, some talk of debts, some of sins. In the end, we talk of a world where we are willing to give before we have received; a world where we are willing to give even what we have not received. A world where we are not keeping count of what we are owed, of wrongs done against us, but where we are the first to forgive. Forgive us our sins. But even if you don’t, we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.”

I’m reminded of a prayer I found recently in the Anglican prayer book: “God, keep my anger from becoming meanness. Keep my pity from collapsing into self-pity. Keep my heart soft enough to keep breaking. Keep my anger turned towards justice, not cruelty. Remind me that every bit of it, all of it, is for love. Keep me fiercely kind. Amen.” O for a world like that! Do you know where we can find a world like that? In her poem simply titled, “Praying,” the late Mary Oliver writes,

It doesn’t have to be a blue iris,
it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don’t try
to make them elaborate, this isn’t
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which

another voice may speak.¹

I'll leave us with this image. One day this past week I stopped in to see Edith Read and Irene Baptista, two sisters who live together just down the road from here. Edith is 90 and she takes care of Irene who is 86, because Irene had a stroke several years ago, and every day her body can do less and less. So she sits in a recliner most of the day, underneath a pile of warm blankets, and Edith switches the channels on the TV for them. On account of the stroke, Irene's voice is also gone, but Edith would tell you she still knows what her sister is saying.

On most visits to see the sisters, I go with a deacon and we celebrate communion with them, and I bring along my guitar so we can sing "You are My Sunshine" and "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore," which Irene seems to love. But this past week I was alone. "I'm just going to stop in," I told Edith on the phone. "Because I'm getting ready to go on vacation for a couple weeks and I wanted to see you before I leave. I won't be coming with anyone else today, or bringing communion with me."

"Okay," Edith said.

We visited for about 30 minutes and as I got up to leave, I went over to take Irene's hand. She sat as she often does, looking somewhat lifeless, but she looked me in the eye still, and she let out a quiet groan.

"She wants to know if we can say the Lord's Prayer together," Edith told me.

"She does?" I would have thought to ask Edith how she knew this from a grunt, but Edith already told me that she knows what her sister has to say.

I reached over and took hold of Irene's right hand. Edith took my other hand and together we made a circle. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." Gggg, went Irene. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Gggg. "Give us this day our daily bread." Gggg. "And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Gggg. "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen." Gggg, Irene let out one last time.

"Lord, teach us to pray," the disciples asked Jesus.

¹ From *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*. Penguin Press Publishing: New York. (1997), p. 131.

“Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come...” Don’t look now, but I believe it has.