

**Proper 12 - 9 Pentecost – Year C – July 25, 2010**  
**Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-19; Luke 11:1-13**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

It was a brilliantly clear and sunny afternoon. School was winding down, and our teacher was feeling benevolent towards the room full of nine year-olds. So she gave us a choice for our early afternoon session in English: write a two-page essay on the theme of summer, or write out the Lord's Prayer from memory. Even though this happened forty years ago, I remember it well. The classroom desks are arranged in clusters of four and I am facing three of my friends. Our eyes widen, and we exchange quick glances, barely able to keep the smirks off our faces. By all accounts, writing out the Lord's Prayer from memory is going to be a whole lot easier than a two-page essay. God only knows what secret prayers were bobbing and floating in the dusty air of the classroom that day. The little community formed by my desk buddies and myself is immodest in our confidence, and ecstatic to have such an easy assignment. That is until we get started. It was impossible not to work as a team and we got maybe three lines in, then a kind of cloud washed away our sunny smiles. The comfortable bulk of confidence that had risen up in our hearts, came bumping down the stairs like a Tonka truck pushed away with cheerful abandon by a naughty sibling. Our faces expressed a dramatic new era in our education. Amusement turned to shock and disbelief at how hard it was to remember a simple prayer that we all recited by rote every single morning at our school assembly.

"Lord teach us to pray," the disciples say to Jesus in today's Gospel account. Think about all the times in the Gospels when a variety of people ask Jesus for something, or ask Him questions. For those of us who like straight answers, the Jesus we meet in the Gospels can be frustrating. So often His responses come in the form of a story or parable, or even a question in return. Jesus rarely responds with that straight answer we crave. According to Philip Yancey in many of the questions of life, "Evidently Jesus wants us to work out answers on our own, using the principles that he taught and lived. Prayer... often operates the same way." Nonetheless, today, Jesus is teaching His disciples, and we get a clear lesson on prayer 101. Then Jesus shares a humorous illustration, and tells us about a surprise gift from our ever-surprising, good and gracious God.

The Lord's Prayer has been expanded for us over the years, yet remains integral to our personal and communal worship, as the bedrock promise of our relationship with God. Since Jesus is Jewish, it is not in the least strange that the basic shape of the prayer that continues to sculpt, mold and shape us, also has the form of a classic Jewish prayer. As usual though, Jesus takes the content to new heights and depths for us. From the unseen, transcendent God, we are invited to call God Abba, Father – like little children calling on a loving parent. From a God so holy that the divine name may not be spoken or written, God's hand enfolds our own, and draws us into an intimate relationship like the most faithful of loving friends. From sovereign God, creator of the universe, of all that is, seen and unseen, we are encouraged to imitate God's mercy and love, and to participate in reconciling all to God in Christ Jesus. Just the first few lines of Jesus' prayer give us a lot to chew on. Prayer is a gift that can take a lifetime to fully unwrap, and appreciate.

There are no pretenses in Jesus' prayer, no wheedling, just precise and honest need presented to One who can and will fulfill our needs. Notice that God's grace covers our needs, which don't always match what we want. Like manna in the wilderness of life, God promises to give us sufficient resources each day, lifting the burden of anxiety beyond the reach of the present moment. God also surprises us with good gifts. We ask for bread, our physical needs are met, and God also forgives us. God forgives us, and then leads us by the hand towards the inward transformation that helps us to forgive others. We imitate God's gracious characteristics of love and mercy, turning away from evil, and God delivers us. We are not always protected from evil, but our deliverance may come in anything from the strength to endure the circumstances and tragedies we are faced with, to the miracle of healing. Each time we ask, we rightly acknowledge our dependence on God alone. Each time we seek God, we remember how vulnerable we are, and how fragile life is. Each time we knock on God's door, we have the opportunity to see a new revelation of God's grace in

action. We are invited to be shameless in our honesty and joyfully persistent. We are called to be exuberant in our gratitude, and to share our lives constantly and fully with our most intimate friend, Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther has a great insight into a life of prayer, he says, “I have so much to do today, that I will have to spend the first three hours in prayer.” Times have surely changed, but few of us would say we are hardly ever busy. With our general level of unceasing activity in thought, word and deed, we have developed a mindset that says whatever we have cooking is much more important than consulting with the head chef. Can we even pause long enough to consider doing the same as Luther, especially on our busiest days? The challenge to set aside time for God is always present. We can’t help but wonder how different the world might be or how different we would be, if we did take time to pray before doing anything else. Our culture tells us that we can do anything we set our minds to, that we are strong and self-sufficient, that we should allow nothing and no one to get in the way of our dreams. In other words, and in so many ways, the voice of our culture speaks constantly against the reality of God’s truth as shared in the Lord’s Prayer, and against the life of a disciple of Jesus. The only prerequisites to prayer are sufficient self-knowledge to recognize the depths of our need, and enough humility to ask for God’s help.

Back at school, together with my friends, we stuttered and staggered our way through the hardest assignment we had faced in our young lives. I remember saying in amazement, as I gazed at the blank lines of paper, “I can’t believe I can’t remember this prayer. We say it every day.” I remember closing my eyes to concentrate – perhaps to recapture the moment several hours earlier in the day, when the prayer slipped over my lips so carelessly, and thoughtlessly. I remember giggling nervously, and I remember the beginnings of something else too. I can’t speak for any of my friends, but as one of the little band of pilgrims, barely nine years-old, practically still wearing training wheels in my prayer life, and by all accounts just a few steps into my spiritual journey, I can say this. I have remembered this hour of prayer vividly because I probably learned more that afternoon in school than in the hundreds of hours I spent honing my academic skills. For sure, prayer takes persistence. Yet we also realize that it takes formation in a community of believers. It flows from an authentic relationship with God in Christ, and intentionality in practice. Prayer requires a sense of humor, a playful and open relationship with God. Prayer happens when we realize our dependence on God, or in other words humble ourselves before the one who IS truly awesome.

With the mingled smells of buzzing effort, polish and chalk tickling my physical senses, I was grounded by a perfect moment of humility before our grand and gracious God, a power beyond self. I paid attention to that knowing, to that feeling, to that desire to reach out and touch, to see more, to know more about this God. It may not have been the first time I consciously sought out God, and it certainly wasn’t the last of my reaching. Yet the moment is still so fresh, because God opened the door a little wider that day when I really got interested in wrestling with the Lord’s Prayer, and pondered the implications of my forgetfulness. Our individual lives, our lives together in this faith community, are truly lives of prayer. Sometimes we are more conscious of it than at other times, but each of us is standing at the door yearning for a better look inside God’s house. We probably would not be here this morning if that were not true. The paradox is that God has made His home within us by grace, by our faith in Christ Jesus, and by the gift of the Holy Spirit. The more fully we desire God, the more fully human and Christ-like we become. As Paul recommends in his first letter to the Thessalonians, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). In those grace-filled moments, we are simultaneously touching eternity, and building God’s kingdom on earth as co-creators with God. Lord teach us to pray without ceasing!

Amen.