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“Lord, teach us to pray” Luke 11:1).

I have retained a number of mental snapshots from my years teaching in three high schools, and one of them comes to mind as I reflect on the power of the “Our Father.”

I attended lots of school sporting events during those years, and one was a championship basketball game in a thundering, packed gym decided by two free throws after the clock had run out. At the line stood an African American player, a rarity in the predominantly white private school league at the time. The gym seemed ready to explode as he sank both baskets to win the game for his team. The memory stuck, I think, because of the sudden intuition I had as I felt the mounting tension and watched the drama play out, that this young man in that moment reached deep within himself and knew that his mother loved him.

When his disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, they were not asking for a formula of words but for him to reveal the source of his extraordinary depth and power. Jesus obliged them by inviting them into his own relationship with God. When he prayed, Jesus was entering into an intimate experience of God’s love. When he preached or worked miracles, Jesus was listening to God’s voice within himself and drawing on God’s compassion.

The “Our Father” was Jesus’ inner room and secret place where his heavenly Father always beheld him and said to him, “You are my beloved Son.” He wanted his disciples to enjoy this same confidence that the Father loved them and would always give them whatever they needed.

The “Our Father” was also Jesus’ ultimate parable, depicting in a decidedly patriarchal and male-dominated culture the image of a father so tender and compassionate, so attentive and protective of his young children, that he might be mistaken for a mother, feeding her children, rising in the middle of the night when they cried out in need. Luke will portray such a father-as-mother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, a great patriarch who surrenders his dignity to race down the road to welcome a child returning home in disgrace.

The petitions in the Our Father position Jesus’ disciples to fulfill perfectly the Great Commandment. The first part of the prayer is about loving God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, honoring the divine name, bringing heaven to earth. The second part is about loving your neighbor as you have been loved, confident that your needs will be met, forgiving as you have been forgiven, avoiding sin and trusting in God’s protection.

To live your life within this vertical relationship with God and horizontal relationship with neighbor is to pray as Jesus did. It aligns us at the crossroads of right relationship that is the perfection of love. There is no better place to be. When the pressure is on and we reach within ourselves for strength, we will know the deepest source of all, the God Jesus was in constant intimacy with and taught his disciples to turn to in prayer.

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