

Our joy may be complete

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I find it very easy to imagine how the disciples, not just on this occasion but on many occasions, watched Jesus praying. In Luke's gospel, we're told that many times, Jesus went apart by himself to be alone in communion with God in deep prayer, and wouldn't you think that as the disciples watched that, they would see Jesus become very peaceful, very serene, a beautiful sense of joy and peace on his countenance, and they would want to know, "How can I pray and be like that?" so the question they asked Jesus is very important: "Teach us how to pray," and Jesus does. And you notice what he tells them, just a very few words -- it was very clear, very direct.

That makes me think of Matthew's gospel where the same situation had developed and Jesus tells his disciples, "When you pray, do not use a lot of words as the pagans do, for they hold that the more they say, the more chance they have of being heard." Isn't it true that some of us, at least, and maybe many of us, when we pray we think we have to say one prayer after another, pray, pray, pray; words, words, words, words? Jesus is saying, "No, that's not important." All those words aren't going to force God to give you what you want, so make your prayer very simple, as Luke tells us: "When you pray, honor God first, hallowed be God's name. Then make God's Kingdom come."

That means we pray that God's will will be fully accepted and carried out by every creature on the earth, all creation, according to God's will, and then everyone will have what you need. There will be peace and joy and fullness of life for every person. So Jesus tells us, pray those simple words, but there's more to it than just words that we use. Maybe even more important is how prayer connects us with God, brings us into communion with God, into relationship with God, and that's what has to happen if our prayer is going to be a kind of prayer that really brings us that sense of peace and serenity that surely Jesus experienced.

The relationship that we have with God is adverted to, at least, in the first lesson today. Just before the part that we heard, God says, "Can I conceal from Abraham what I am about to do?" God has already spoken with Abraham, has shared with Abraham God's will. Abraham is in a very familiar relationship with God, and that's why he can be as he says, "I'll be even more bold. I'll keep haggling, negotiating with God." Again, that reminds me of something in the gospel, the gospel of John in this case, where Jesus is speaking to his disciples at the Last Supper, a very intimate conversation; they are his closest friends. He says to them, "There's no greater love than this, to give one's life for one's friends, and you are my friends."

That's what Jesus says to those first disciples, "You are my friends," and he says the same thing to us, "You are my friends. I shall not call you servant anymore because a servant does not know what the master is about. Instead I call you friends since I have made known to you everything God revealed to me." That's the relationship Abraham had with God. It's a relationship the first disciples developed with Jesus and through Jesus with God, and that's the same relationship we can have with God, and it's the basis for our prayer: "You are my friends. I told you everything God revealed to me and that proves you're my friends." So when we pray, we pray to God through Jesus, who is our friend. What a beautiful relationship we have with God, so our prayers should be a very open and simple prayer, a friend in communion with another friend. Words don't even have to be used. It's a very deep relationship.

Finally, as we think about our prayer and the relationship that that prayer gives us to God, that last part of the gospel today is very important. Many of you are fathers and mothers, and if your son or daughter asked for a fish, will you give them a snake instead? Of course not. Fathers and mothers love their children and give them what's always best for them, and that's how God relates to us. As Jesus says, "Even if you know how to give your gifts to your children, how much more will God give the fullness of gifts, the holy spirit, to all of us who are God's children?" God goes so far beyond anything we can do, yet as Jesus says, we do good things, we love our children.

But God goes beyond and there are many, many examples of this throughout the scriptures. One that I find especially compelling, and that really, for me, shows us the kind of God we're praying to, we're speaking to, entering into communion to. There's a passage in the 30th chapter of the book of Isaiah where the prophet has been telling the chosen people, who are under threat from the Egyptian army, "Don't go to war. That won't do you any good. Lay down your arms." Then they go to war anyway. As Isaiah puts it, they said, "No, we will flee on horses," so God says, "Very well then, flee," and they added, "We will ride on swift steeds. Our pursuer will not be swifter. At the threat of one, a thousand will flee. At the threat of five, all will flee." So they go to war, totally contrary to what God had asked, but then here in the 18th verse of chapter 30, "Yet God waits to be gracious to them." One of the most beautiful lines in sacred scripture, I think, God waiting to be gracious to us, to fill us with God's goodness and God's love. All we have to do is turn to God, open ourselves, and God is waiting to be gracious to us.

How can we be confident that all of this is true, that that's our relationship with God, and that we can enter into deep communion as a friend with God. Well, remember what Paul says in our second lesson today, "You were dead. You were in sin, but God gave you life with Christ. God forgave all our sins, cancelled the record of our debts, because," Paul says, "in baptism you were buried with Christ and you also rose with him to new life." That's what's happened to every one of us. In our baptism, we were buried in the waters of baptism, died with Jesus, but we rise to new life, we share the very life of Jesus, the Son of God, and so that's why we can pray in the way Jesus teaches us today -- not a lot of words, asking for what's most important, the reign of God to happen, God's name be hallowed, and that we relate to God as a deep friend so we can always be in deep communion in our prayer. If we prayed this way, then I'm confident that what Jesus also says to the disciples in that conversation at the Last Supper, "I tell you all of this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete." That's the promise if we pray to God in the way Jesus teaches us today.

[This homily was preached at St. Anne Church, Frankfort, Mich.]

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