

Blogging toward Sunday

By [William H. Willimon](#)

July 23, 2007

Jesus was praying one day when his disciples interrupted him, begging, “Teach us to pray like John taught his disciples.”

Jesus graciously obliged them, giving them a succinct prayer. “When you pray, do it like this....”

Prayer, at least prayer in “Jesus’ name,” as Jesus practiced it, does not come naturally. Most people I know think that our prayers ought to be “heartfelt” or “sincere.” Jesus apparently could care less about such sentimental mush. He has a definite, peculiar notion of what constitutes prayer. Prayer is not whenever I spill my guts to God: prayer is when I obey Jesus and pray for the things that he teaches me to pray for and when I pray the way he prays. Prayer is bending my feelings, my desires, my thoughts and yearnings toward Jesus and what he wants me to feel, desire and think.

In most churches I visit, a time of prayer is often preceded by a time of “Joys and Concerns.” I notice that in every congregation, the only concerns expressed are concerns for people in the congregation who are going through various health crises. Prayer becomes what we used to refer to as “Sick Call” in the army. Where on earth did we get this idea of prayer? Not from Jesus. He healed a few people from time to time, but he doesn’t pray for that. He prays for the coming of God’s kingdom, for bread (but only on a daily basis, not for a surplus) and for forgiveness for our trespasses. It’s curious that physical deterioration has become the contemporary North American church’s main concern in prayer. Jesus is most notable for teaching that we are to pray—not for recent gall bladder surgery—but for our enemies!

To be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, is to pray like Jesus. Therefore Luther called the Lord’s Prayer “a summary of the whole gospel.” A Christian is someone who talks to God about what the Lord’s Prayer talks with God about. Thus this prayer is not only a gift that Jesus gives us, but also judgment against us as we measure our own fidelity

against the standard of Jesus.

Prayer is one of the few things that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them, and he graciously responded. A Christian is someone who is engaged in lifelong training in how to pray like Jesus. Thank God, Jesus does not leave us to our own devices when it comes to prayer. If I were praying on my own, would I pray for something as mundane as daily bread, or that I would have the guts to acknowledge that I had actually trespassed against someone? No. There would be no way for me to pray faithfully in Jesus name if he weren't there every Sunday coaching me, prodding me, saying, "Why you pray, say this...."

The summit of Christian worship, the most challenging moment, is that risky, countercultural, against-our-natural-inclination moment when someone stands amid the congregation and says, "Let us pray."