

HOMILY SUNDAY 17 – C (Homily 02)

“Lessons on Prayer from Prayer”

(Genesis 18:20-21, 23-32; Psalm 138; Col 2:6-14; Luke 11:1-13)

Every now and then, noted writer, theologian and speaker, Ron Rolheiser OMI, gives a talk or writes an article on the Ten Commandments for the Long Haul.

It struck me while praying with this gospel that the same format could be used for today’s gospel on the famous prayer, the *Our Father*. We would have ten lessons on prayer, rather than commandments. Here is how it would unfold:

1. Prayer must be a priority

The bible often portrays Jesus at prayer. He would go out in the early morning to pray; he would pray in certain places; he sometimes spent long nights in prayer. The bottom line is that Jesus prayed. He spent hours in communion with his Father, soaking up the Father’s love, and loving God back in prayer. If Jesus made prayer a priority in his life, then so must we.

2. Prayer is all about fostering a relationship with God

Jesus called God his Father and he came among us as Son of God. He revealed to us that God is family, relationship, intimacy. The Holy Spirit is the bond of love that unites Jesus and the Father. We who are baptized into Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit are joined to the Holy Trinity, a God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons in one God-head. Our God is a relational God. What is important is that we foster an intimate relationship with God as Jesus did, through prayer.

3. Life is a healing journey

One of the strongest characteristics of God in this prayer is that God is holy. We who are baptized into God must also be holy, whole, well. We have been born into a beautiful but wounded world, tainted by original sin that has affected all of creation, and every human being. Jesus came to redeem and sanctify us, to save us and to make us holy, to heal us. As his followers, we need to be on healing journeys, aware of our need for healing and coming to him for that healing.

4. Life is all about the kingdom of God

Jesus was sent to us to inaugurate the Reign of God among us. The focus of most of his preaching and teaching was on the Kingdom of God. The coming of God's reign among us was his passion. Once in the New Testament (Luke 17:21), Jesus mentions that the Reign of God is not only near us, but also within and among us. That Reign of God must also be the focus of the Church's evangelizing activity and our focus as individual believers and followers of Jesus.

5. Greed is out; the Common Good is in

We are taught in this prayer to pray only for what we need from day to day, and not to accumulate and hoard possessions or goods. Unbridled capitalism and unregulated profit-seeking is at the root of the recent recession, in short, greed. If only big business would take this teaching to heart. The answer is to bring back a strong sense of the common good as the underlying ethic for business and political life in our society.

6. Repentance is the key

At the core of this prayer is the request for God to forgive us. St. Paul, in the second reading today, reminds us that God has forgiven us all through the death of Jesus on the cross. We need now only to repent and receive that forgiveness, as did the prodigal son in the story of the loving father. That reality has its own name and process. It begins with repentance, contrition, an awareness that we have sinned. Biblically, sin is *harmatia*, or missing the mark, falling short of what we are called to be. This awareness is accompanied by sorrow, a deep desire to change, confession and a commitment to make amends. Steps 4 & 5, 8 & 9 of the program of Alcoholics Anonymous are a tried and true guide in this regard.

7. Learning to forgive is central

After the prayer for forgiveness, the prayer expresses a condition that we will be able to receive God's forgiveness to the degree that we are able to forgive others. Speaking of holiness and healing journeys mentioned earlier, this is the crux of the matter, and where most of us need our greatest healing. We need to learn how to forgive those who hurt and abused us, who have made themselves our enemies. Jesus teaches us this in Matthew 18:15-18. The simplest way to forgive someone is to take in the hurt they have caused, refuse to respond in kind, pray about it, and give it back to the abuser with love, which alone breaks the cycle of violence in our world. We give it back with love by sharing our hurt feelings with the abuser, instead of acting out

of anger towards the abuser, and letting it go. In that discipline not to retaliate, to let go of revenge, is the love that heals us and opens the door to reconciliation.

8. Be ready for the test

After Mother Theresa of Calcutta died, a book of her letters was published which, to everyone's surprise, revealed that she struggled with the apparent absence of God from the day she began her work as a Missionary of Charity. She who appeared to be constantly filled with the closeness of God actually struggled with a terrible dryness in her prayer and a constant feeling of the absence of God. Many judged her to be actually weak in faith, not understanding that the truth was just the opposite. Her faith was so strong that she was given the same test that Jesus experience on the cross, the utter absence of God. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is what Jesus cried out before he died. That cry, however, comes from Psalm 22 which ends with a magnificent affirmation of faith in God's benevolent love, despite what one might be feeling. Mother Theresa's faith was actually so strong that she was completely identified with the suffering servant of God, Jesus on the cross. Our faith is not that strong – that is why we need to pray this prayer, that we might not be given that test. Or if we are, that we will understand it and be able to endure it, like her.

9. Persevere in prayer

Life in Christ is not about cheap grace, nor is prayer about a quick fix, much as we would sometimes wish it was. Prayer is not about getting something out of God, or only asking God to do our will. It is more about slowly but surely opening ourselves up to what is God's will for us, and doing it. Prayer includes praise, thanksgiving, adoration as well as petition. Our petitions should be as much an act of faith that God is somehow answering our prayer, in much deeper ways than we could imagine; that will encourage us to continue praying for our needs even though they do not seem to be getting results. Mature prayer, above all, is simply being in God's presence and trusting that God is doing whatever God wants to do in us.

10. Pray for the Holy Spirit

Ultimately, there is only one thing that we really need to pray for, and that is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of the Risen Lord is the greatest gift that God can give to us. To live in the Spirit of Christ is to live life to the full and all else will take care of itself. There is a beautiful freedom in understanding this teaching on prayer and living it.

The first reading speaks of the power of a righteous person to even change the mind and heart of God. Anyone who truly lives the teachings of the *Our Father* must certainly be such a righteous person.

One such person was Bill Lumsden of North Battleford, an uncle of Archbishop Sylvain's sister-in-law Judy, who died recently. He was a psychiatric nurse, a war veteran and finally a mailman. One of his many qualities was the ability to affirm almost everyone he met. At his funeral many stories extolling other virtues of this humble, righteous man emerged. One that particularly moved Judy was told to her by one of his fellow postmen. It seems that a particular supervisor who was a control freak delighted in demeaning one of the workers regularly at coffee break when all were gathered. One day this man was the chosen victim and was torn to shreds by the supervisor. Without a word, Bill got up, put his mailbag on the table and walked out. When he did not return, the supervisor and foreman went to his house to find out why. His first comment was that he had not fought in the war and watched his comrades die for a country where people were treated that way. He refused to return to work unless the supervisor apologized to the worker, not one-on-one, but during the coffee break in front of everyone, where the incident had happened. The next day, the apology took place. The worker, who that day was on the verge of quitting, told Judy that he owed his career as a postman to her uncle Bill.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today has at its center, after the liturgy of the word and before we receive communion, this prayer, the Our Father. It is no accident that it has found its way into the liturgy, as it embodies the deepest beliefs of our faith in Christ.

May we take the lessons that the Our Father teaches us to heart, and live them to the full, as faithful disciples of Jesus who have been taught by him how to pray, and how to live what we pray.