

Lord, teach us how to pray. I want to tell you a story of the most personal and transformative encounter in prayer that I've ever had. Pregnancy, giving birth, and caring for our son Asher in his first years of life was really difficult on Sarah's body. She has rheumatoid arthritis, so while being pregnant and nursing, she could not be on any arthritis medication. For two years, her joints were inflamed, and this resulted in her having knee surgery. As many of you know all too well, recovery from surgery can take a long, long time. Several months into her rehab, we began to worry that the surgery might have failed.

At that time, I led a Wednesday morning book group with a few men from my church. We had just finished a chapter where the author had taught about how personal prayer is. He wrote about how he had been out in the woods with a friend, and they split up to spend some time in private prayer. When they reunited, the author's friend had found a deer antler along the way, and he received this as a gift of love from the God. Now, the author said that while he was pleased for his friend, on the inside he was quietly mad at God. Apparently, finding antlers had been a meaningful part of his prayer life in the past, and he felt slighted by God that he had not found an antler of his own. Now, I'll be honest with you, this story has always felt weird to me. Why would the God of the universe care about someone finding an antler? Doesn't God have more important prayers to attend to? It seemed like a selfish prayer for an adult to make. As the story went on, the author went back to his vehicle and stumbled upon a giant, 10-point antler. Upon finding it, he felt God saying to him, "Do you think I don't care about what you want? Do you think I don't know what you need?"

As we talked about this story, I told the book group that I no faith that God would ever do anything like that for me. I simply did not believe that God would ever do something so outlandish or personal on my behalf. The others in the group were so gracious to me. They knew that Sarah was struggling to recover and how difficult that had been on our family. So, they prayed that I would have my own antler experience, that God would give me an outlandish, personal sign of love. As they prayed for me, I had little to no faith that this prayer would be answered.

I often hear people say things like, "I believe in the power of prayer," and I'm not sure what to make of that. What do we mean when we say that? Atheists often point out that a God who answers certain prayers while ignoring others is problematic, and they are right. Are we to believe that God answers the prayers of a certain man who likes deer antlers while ignoring atrocities like war, starvation, and the Holocaust? If God does that, what does that say about God? The truth is I don't fully understand prayer. I don't think anyone does, but I still pray.

This is the only place in the Gospels where the disciples ask Jesus to teach them. They don't ask him to teach about theology or ethics. They don't ask for a lesson on how to grow their organization. They want to know how to pray, and Jesus gives them a simple and familiar prayer, what we call, "The Lord's Prayer." You probably noticed Luke's version is shorter than Matthew's, which is the one we use, but it's essentially the same prayer. Jesus addresses God as Father, an inherently personal word. Whether you have a good or strained relationship with your earthly father, however your father treated you, you take it personally. That's how Jesus invites us to address God, in personal, relational terms, to trust that we are known personally, that our needs, our joys, and our heartbreaks matter to God. For some people, relating to God as Father is difficult, and instead prefer to address God as mother, or parent. I don't think the

gender matters. What matters is keeping it personal. We don't pray to the force or to electromagnetism, but to a Divine Parent who cares about our needs.

The image of a personal God can be both comforting and problematic. There have been times when my life situation was so bewildering that I wished I could relate to God impersonally. The idea that God knew my problems and wasn't doing anything to help was more painful to me than an impersonal benevolence. But for better or worse, Jesus invites us to relate to God personally. He invites us to pray that God's kingdom might come. Another way of saying that is to pray that God's dream for the world might come true. Then he invites us to ask God for bread, that our basic needs might be met. We pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," which is pretty redundant, isn't it? Give us today, our daily bread. The Greek here is ambiguous. It could be more likely translated, "**Give us today, tomorrow's bread,**" but most translators think that doesn't make sense, so they opt for daily. Why would Jesus have us pray for tomorrow's bread? Well, tomorrow's bread may refer to the heavenly banquet, that great day in the future, of God's Big Table where everyone is welcome, everyone is safe and fed. Jesus may be inviting us to ask that we might taste God's promised future today, that a little bit of God's dream for the world might come true right here and now.

The parable he tells support this reading, where a friend awakens a neighbor asking that he might have some of tomorrow's bread right now. The friend asleep at midnight had bread baked for the next day, and that's what the neighbor wants. Jesus goes on to say, "Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. Everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. To everyone who knocks, the door is opened." Whatever Jesus means, we know he doesn't mean that God will give us anything we want. I tried that with Megamillions, and it didn't work. But we know that. God isn't a cosmic vending machine, a genie who grants our wishes. I think Jesus is trying to teach us that God cares deeply about our needs, but above all else longs to give us God's own self. That's what God wants to give us. Jesus says, if we know how to give good gifts to our children, **how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?** By all means, tell God your needs, pray for tomorrow's bread, but know that above all else, God wants to give us God's own self, that our life might be filled with God's life. For when we are filled with God's Spirit, then we know that no matter what happens, we are forever loved and held tightly by the God who is love. More than anything else, that's what God wants to give us.

After praying with my friends on Wednesday morning, that God would grant me an antler moment, the next day, on Thursday, I went out to get the mail. In it, there was a hand addressed card from the Ohio State Athletic Department with Sarah's name on it. I brought it inside and asked her why she would be getting a card from them? She shrugged and said, maybe they are asking for money? **She opened it, and found this:** "Sarah, we understand that you are working hard on your knee rehab. Please know that the Buckeyes are cheering for you! God bless! Go Bucks! Jim Tressel." Sarah proceeded to declare with great joy, "I'm on the team!" I came into the kitchen to hug and celebrate, and then our toddler waddled into the room to hug his mother, and our old dog, whose name—I kid you not—was Tressel, came in to celebrate as well. We had no idea how this card came to us, but at a time in our lives, when I needed it most, the day after I prayed for an outlandish, personal sign of God's love, this is what showed up in our mailbox.

I still don't understand how prayer works, why some prayers seem to be answered while others do not. What I do know is this, God wants to hear our prayers, not for God's sake, but for ours. Prayer opens our eyes to the signs of God's love that are all around us. We miss them if we don't look for them, and prayer helps us look. I also know this: God cares about your needs, your joys, and your heartbreaks. When you feel alone and unseen, you are loved with an everlasting love, beyond what you'll ever know, that God dwells in you, and you dwell in God. The day is coming, when we will all feast together at God's Big Table, where everyone belongs, and all have enough. That's God's dream for this world. Until that day comes, we pray that the bread of tomorrow might come to today.

Let's pray: Come, Holy Spirit, grant us the gift of yourself, your life in our life, our life in yours, that as we walk through our days, we might do so in the assurance that we belong to you, that there is no moment of our lives where our needs, heartbreaks, and joys are unknown to you. Our cannot be unknown to you, for you dwell in us, and we in you. Assure our fearful hearts that we are fully known and loved. Open our eyes to outlandish signs of your love, that we might taste tomorrow's bread today, that your dream for this world, where everyone belongs, all are fed and cared for, might be known here and now. Give us today, tomorrow's bread. Amen.