

Teach us to pray. There probably hasn't been a disciple of any spiritual discipline, Christian or otherwise, who hasn't asked that question of their master. John the Baptist's disciples were taught by him...Jesus was likely one of those disciples!

Clergy are constantly asked for suggestions or instruction on prayer practices. It is a subject that never goes stale. We are always changing as we grow in our faith and each new stage requires that we look at how we communicate with God.

Think for a minute. What was the first prayer you ever learned? Was it a grace before meals? "God is great, God is good, and we thank Him for our food. Amen."? Were you as puzzled as I was that good and food didn't rhyme?

Or, for those of us who come from a more Catholic tradition, was your first memorized prayer that long one-sentence grace you were supposed to say in one breath? "Bless us O Lord and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord. Amen."

I never really had any idea what I was saying when I said that prayer, I just knew I had to say it without gasping.

Perhaps the first prayer you learned was that bedtime prayer “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep.” Whose bright idea was it to teach small children ask God to watch over their souls in the night in case they die. That prayer kept me awake, thank you very much.

My guess is that the first prayer you really learned, not just memorized, was the one we say was taught by Jesus to his disciples. If you didn’t learn it at your parents’ behest, you most likely heard it in church. You learned by sheer repetition and didn’t care what the words meant. Unless you are like me.

I don’t know if it is a function of my genetic make-up or not, but my brain had the hardest time understanding why we would ask God to forgive us for walking across our neighbors’ yards or for us to forgive them for walking on ours. That’s what all those signs along the farmer’s fields meant, wasn’t it? Trespassing, that is?

I’ve always been a theological agitator.

Growing up in the Episcopal Church in the 60's and 70's there was only one way of saying the Lord's Prayer/Our Father. If you were as ecumenically impaired as I was growing up, you would get tripped up if fate had you in another protestant denomination's service where *debts* replaced *trespasses*.

And, just when this Anglo-Catholic Episcopalian thought she'd faked her way through a Roman Mass, up came the Our Father without the ending doxology. I swear it was the way the RC's identified all the undercover Protestants right before communion. I felt like I had a scarlet "A", for Anglican, sewn into my blouse.

As a child, prayer was more like presenting Santa Jesus with a wish list. My mom was the supervising elf who reminded me that sometimes the answer would be 'no', not this Christmas. Or, "I don't think God cares if you get a pony?" (insert eye roll)

I dutifully went to catechism classes and over three years memorized everything I needed to know to be a good Christian. Thank heaven we don't make kids do that anymore.

I remember distinctly our teacher, the rector's wife, parsing out the Lord's Prayer like we were in English class. "The Lord's Prayer is written with imperatives. These are all things we expect of God," I remember her saying in her gruff, tobacco-scarred voice. "We expect Him to be holy, to provide for us, to keep us safe." I really wish that I'd been a little older when she taught us that, because the full gravity of that was lost on me at 12.

Church of the Good Shepherd was using the 'new' 1979 Book of Common Prayer when I arrived at Purdue University in the fall of 1977. The contemporary version of the Lord's Prayer caught my attention. It used language that I used – it was in my vernacular. I prayed it addressing God as an honored and trusted friend, not as some far-away, untouchable sovereign.

As I became more familiar with this new prayer book, I identified myself as a Christian and not just an Episcopalian. I never really understood the difference until then!

The Easter Vigil, the Baptismal Covenant, the priest facing the community at the Eucharist, old prayers now understandable to modern ears – all these ways of praying, connected with work in the community, reshaped my relationship with God.

Today, I embrace God as parent, as brother, as protector. I sing the Lord's Prayer, say it in both versions, and on Pentecost – I give German my best shot. I pray the prayer Jesus taught us all the time. It's my "go to" when I don't know what else to pray.

The Lord's Prayer is a prayer with purpose.

It reminds me that

- God is holy and that holiness invites us into an intimate relationship with each other.
- God will provide for us those things we need and God expects us to ask for them.
- God expects us to forgive each other and ourselves in the same way God forgives us.
- Most importantly: God's kingdom, power, and glory are forever.