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## *The Rev. Brandon Duke: Teach Us To Pray*

**A sermon by the Rev. Brandon Duke**  
**Proper 12 – Year C**

Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.  
And if I die before I wake,  
I pray, the Lord, my soul to take.

Guide us waking, Oh Lord, and guard us sleeping,  
that awake we may watch with Christ,  
and asleep we may rest in peace.  
~A prayer from *Compline (Night Prayers)*

Mary had a little lamb its fleece was white as snow.  
And everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go.

To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them.  
~From *W. Shakespeare's Hamlet (Spoken by Hamlet)*

“We have to learn to pray. We have to learn to pray, as it were, learning this art ever anew from the lips of the Divine Master himself like the first disciples who say to Jesus, Lord, teach us to pray. Yes, dear brothers and sisters, our Christian communities must become genuine schools of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed. Not just in imploring help, but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion until the heart truly falls in love.” ~Pope John Paul II

When I was a child, my parents taught me to say the *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep* prayer before bedtime. Now, and as a parent myself, I intentionally chose *not* to teach it to my own children (mainly) because I discovered a night time prayer I personally found a bit more mature, poetic, and beautiful. It just so happens to come out of *The Book of Common Prayer*, “Guide us waking, Oh Lord, and guard us sleeping...” (BCP, 134-135). Although there is nothing (theologically) erroneous about *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep*, I simply discovered that I outgrew the prayer because as I matured and ripened into a young man - and now a middle-aged one - I desired a more stable and settled prayer for my night-time routine. Not only this, I wanted to gift my own children with a prayer that not only aged well, but matured alongside them. In today's Gospel, Jesus makes a similar move. He not only gave the *Our Father* to a few grown men, he offered it as a constant companion which had the potential to not only mature alongside them, but to continuously “learn [the art of prayer] ever anew,” quoting Pope John Paul II again.

For those of us who are over the age of six, we only pick up a copy of *Mother Goose's Nursery Rhymes* when we're reading to our children, grandchildren, nieces, or nephews, cousins, or preschoolers. They are enduring poetry, and coupled with Grimm's Fairy Tales, or Aesop's Fables, reveal deep morals and abiding character

traits that have traditionally set children up for success – especially when a child has access to adults in their lives who live out the morality found in those stories. As an adult, I'm often convicted when I (re)read them. There are profound truths held within which I never realized as a child, and it excites me to think about my own children discovering these stories within themselves for the first time.

I quoted from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* a moment ago. His famous soliloquy is usually introduced at the high school or college levels. It's written into these institution's curricula because the student's mind at that level can read, comprehend, and articulate abstract and complex concepts – something our nursery school children cannot do, simply based upon biological development. I juxtaposed *Mary Had a Little Lamb* with *Hamlet* to make the point that we grow up. We move on. We live. We struggle, and all along the way, we look for stories, music, art, poetry, liturgies, and prayers that help us make sense of our lives. But listen: If we're middle-aged or older and we're still reading the same old books, or praying the same old prayers, and still interpreting them in the same old ways then what are we doing? There's nothing wrong with listening to the same music, or loving the same movie, but if we haven't allowed these things to mature alongside us, then what good are they accomplishing within us? The Episcopal Church has been acting out the same Eucharistic liturgy since 1979. Can you articulate the ways in which these prayers and these liturgies have shaped and reshaped your beliefs about God, mankind, and the world? I certainly hope that all of us, and with God's grace, are continuing to learn the art of prayer ever anew.

Today, Jesus gives us the *Our Father* prayer. We're introduced to it as Christians. If you've been a Christian your whole life perhaps you've been praying it since your nursery school days, and now pray it as an adult. Through life's natural cycles you, and like Jesus' disciples, have asked along life's path, "Teach us how to pray." So God taught you again for the first time when you were in school, when you acquired your first job, or when you fell in love. God taught you to pray it by yourself and in community. You saw it in a different light when you said it at weddings or at a close friend's funeral. Perhaps you were taught it again when you witnessed your child's baptism and in one of the Church's High Holy Day Eucharists? It's Jesus' teaching and accompanying prayer, and therefore, the Church's prayer - given to us as a gift that changes, matures, and reveals God the Father to us every step of the way and with God's beautiful, paternalistic, sustaining love. How has this prayer accompanied you through your own life?

I found it interesting, and somewhat revealing on Jesus' disciples' part, that they not only asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, but in asking him this, they compared his way of teaching to John the Baptist's way that he taught his disciples. The Gospel reads, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." How is this revealing?[1] How many times do we as humans, and our institutions get caught up in comparing ourselves with one another – and in doing so are arrested in our development – spiritual and otherwise? "I want you, God, to teach me how to pray like John teaches his disciples," can easily turn into the never ending trap of looking for the next big thing, keeping up with the Jones' – spiritually speaking. Don't get me wrong. It's perfectly admirable, proper and expected to ask God, your church, the clergy, or one of your fellow baptized Christians to teach you how to pray. What was arguably misdirected with the disciple's question behind the question was his comparing John with Jesus. Jesus would later address this predicament with his disciples when he candidly asked them, "but who do you say that I am?" In other words, there were lots of rumors, mischaracterization, and ill intentions when those not close to Jesus had a say so. But to his closest disciples and to his friends, he showed them mercy, and gave them what they wanted even if the intentions of their hearts carried envy and jealousy.

More than any other Gospel, prayer is a theme throughout St. Luke's Gospel, and Jesus is the one revealing to us his life of prayer. Key moments within his life – at his baptism, the calling of his apostles, his transfiguration, and passion – place prayer at the center because they show Jesus the man desiring total submission to God, the Father, to know God's will perfectly, and to carry it out.[2] Thus, his prayers throughout his own life, reveal themselves to be models of prayer for us.[3] And so, I'll ask again: What does your prayer life look like? How has it changed over the years? Has it matured alongside you? Are you able to teach others to pray, or how to discern God's will? Do you experience your parish home as a house of prayer? These types of questions are honest questions of any disciple, any follower of Jesus Christ. What is Jesus teaching you today? What adventures is he calling you to? Why not pray about it, and ask him again as if for the first time.

[1] It must be said that my argument in this paragraph is quite assuming in that there is no evidence of ill intention on the part of the disciples when asking Jesus to teach them how to pray. In hindsight, the text should read as the text reads – genuinely desiring their prophetic teacher to teach them how to pray. Again, there is no evidence that the disciples' hearts "carried envy and jealousy". I'm indebted to the St. Philip's parishioner who pointed this out to me in love. Isn't it great that Christians have permission from Our Lord and in His Church to

have 'brave conversations?' Thanks be to God!

[2] Dr. Mary Healy, professor of scripture at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit MI, lecture on St. Luke's Gospel retrieved on the *Hallow* App. Accessed on 7/23/2002.

[3] Ibid.

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