

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on July 24, 2016 (Proper 12, Year C)

One of the things that happens when you tell people you're going to seminary is you suddenly become the 'designated pray-er' at all family gatherings. Thanksgiving? "Oh, Tim'll say grace." Christmas dinner? "We should ask Tim — he needs the practice." Random Sunday dinner? "Tim, you're on."

This continues, of course, once you're ordained. At most meetings I attend, I get "the nod." As in, oh good, the professional's here. Let *him* say the opening prayer. And while I'm always happy to do so — which is a good thing since I'm, you know, a priest — clergy don't have a monopoly on prayer. They never have, they never will, and most importantly they never should. Because if prayer becomes the realm of a spiritual elite, we're all in trouble.

But I do find a profound spiritual bashfulness when I invite others to lead us in prayer. In a group setting I often get an uncomfortable shuffling of the feet, downward glances, awkward silence. Basically I feel like the middle school sex ed teacher on the first day of class.

In speaking to people about this phenomenon, the biggest hesitation people cite is that they'll do it "wrong." That they'll say the wrong words or that it won't sound like a "real" prayer. Sprinkle a fear of public speaking into the mix and you end up with the perfect storm of what could be diagnosed as prayer performance anxiety or PPA.

The problem, of course, is that this misses the point of prayer. There's not a right and a wrong way to pray. Prayer isn't a magic formula or incantation. If you're a witch and you're trying to turn little children into, say, frogs, you need to get the magic words down exactly as they're written in that giant book of spells. But that's not how prayer works! You can stumble over words, you can sit in silence — it doesn't matter. Because God already knows what's on your heart.

So prayer is just a conversation; an acknowledgment that there is a force at work in God that exists beyond what we can see and control. And yet for as long as anyone can remember, humans have been intimidated by the prospect of prayer; of approaching a deity with whom they seek relationship.

This may be why the disciples take Jesus aside and say, "Lord, teach us to pray." Perhaps the question was rooted in their own spiritual insecurity. These disciples were simple men, after all. They weren't used to being the center of attention or being asked to lead others in prayer. And what Jesus gives them isn't some long and flowery incantation. The Lord's Prayer is basic and straightforward, yet it contains all we need to engage God with sincerity and authenticity.

If you break it apart, the Lord's Prayer is brilliant in its simplicity. It begins by reminding us just who it is we're addressing — "Our Father, who art in heaven." It reminds us that God is sovereign — "Thy kingdom come." It reminds us that God provides — "Give us this day our daily bread." It reminds us that God forgives — "Forgive us our trespasses." And so should we — "as we forgive those who trespass against us." It reminds us that evil exists but that we have an antidote in Jesus — "Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil."

So Jesus gives us a fundamental and sufficient and well-beloved outline of how to pray. But still, when it comes to prayer, it's important to occasionally put relationship with God in our own words; to step away from the teleprompter, to go off script.

It's like when you're married it's nice to recall your wedding vows, sure. But if you go through life together and all you keep saying over and over again is, "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health," rather than telling your spouse what they mean to you beyond the formula, you'll miss an opportunity for deeper connection. And you may want to see your priest for some counseling.

Perhaps it's helpful to make a distinction between public and private prayer. In the Episcopal Church we have a *Book of Common Prayer*. That's "common" as in "communal" not common as in ordinary or pedestrian. When we gather as a worshipping community there are set prayers, gleaned from Scripture and the wisdom and practice of generations of English-speaking worshipers. There's a poetry and a dignity to the words that transcend what we might come up with in the moment. That's one of the major differences between churches in the liturgical tradition and those that are more free-form. And there are inherent dangers in both styles — the tendency toward rote and listening to the words without really hearing them on the one hand and a free-for-all of unordered chaos on the other.

There's been a lot of public prayer this past week at the Republican Convention and there will be more next week as the Democrats gather. Between today's gospel passage and the invocations and benedictions in Cleveland and Philadelphia, it's a topic that's been on my mind. One of the most jarring prayers I've ever heard — and this transcends politics — was given by Pastor Mark Burns on the opening night of the Republican National Convention. Did you hear that one? He talked about Hillary Clinton and the Democratic party as "the enemy." Which is evangelical code for "devil." Call me old fashioned but I prefer prayers that don't demonize others, regardless of what you may think of their politics.

I was interested to learn that a colleague of mine, Steve Ayres, who's the Vicar at Old North Church, had the opportunity to give the opening prayer at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. He wasn't asked to do this because of his political leanings but because Old North is the most iconic church in America and it was five blocks from the convention site. Steve was reflecting on this experience and shared his three rules for praying in public — something he's often asked to do.

“1. Be as inclusive as possible in the choice of words and images. Pray so that anyone in the audience can feel comfortable saying “amen.” 2. Ask for God’s blessing, never God’s judgment. 3. Use prayer to help deepen the audience’s spiritual connections to God and to the world.”

He went on to say that “Pastor Mark Burns’ prayer violated all three rules. It was divisive and offensive. It cursed political opponents. It was shallow to the point of being unrelated to reality.”

So what was Steve’s experience in 2004? I find this fascinating. He says, “The arena was only a third full. Most of the delegates and reporters did not stop to pray. I was background noise. The notable exceptions were delegates of color, who all stopped to listen and pray. A thought went through my head – ‘is anyone besides my mother watching this at home?’

“I began my prayer by inviting the delegates to walk around the corner to visit Old North and breathe in the patriotic values we enshrine. Few did. I am convinced that if John Kerry had taken the time for a photo-op at Old North, he might have won Ohio.

“I reminded the delegates that while Old North Church was famous for the two lanterns that launched the Revolutionary War, our fame wasn’t established until Longfellow wrote a poem on the eve of the Civil War that summoned the nation to a new battle for freedom, a battle we still seem to be fighting today. I concluded this short history lesson with a prayer that the freedom we enjoy be extended to all citizens of the nation and the world. I was then whisked off the stage, out of the dark hall, and out into the summer heat.”

And *that’s* how you pray at a national political convention.

Look, prayer takes practice. It’s referred to as a “discipline” for a reason. I’m never going to put someone on the spot and compel them to pray in public but it is something I encourage you to work on. Get out of your comfort zone — start by saying grace with your family or small group of friends. And recognize that any words you speak are simply an offering of the heart. You can’t mess it up. But you *can* be drawn ever deeper into relationship with our Lord.