



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, May 6, 2012
The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Festal Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock

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Sermon Series: "Lord, Teach Us to Pray"
SERMON 13: PETITION AND INTERCESSION

There are two forms of prayer that seem to be nothing more than asking God for stuff. They are petition; that is, asking God for stuff on our own behalf; and intercession, asking God for stuff on behalf of another person. Both forms are good and commendable. Though, on the surface, they appear to be the simplest forms of prayer, they present some difficulties.

A parent recently told me about asking his daughter why she cried every time he, the father, told her no. The answer from the child: because when I cry, you change your mind and I get what I want. Even indulgent parents, I think, understand that, in theory, to give children everything they ask for seems nice, but in practice, it's a wicked idea. Truly, we know that getting everything we want has a way of backfiring on our character and spoils our better nature.

No one blames me for not giving my children everything they ask for. Why do we lose that perspective when we think about our petitions to God? We sometimes think some awful things about God when he is not doing what we want him to do or giving us what we want him to give us. What is commendable in me; is faithless, uncaring, remote, and cruel, in God. We don't really want God to be love; we want him to be good natured. The consequences for such thinking are that we can go into a sulk and stop praying altogether, or we intensify our prayers as if it were nothing more than a persuasive technique by which we change God's mind.

I've never been good at car repair, all my attempts end with me looking around for a hammer, but when I was younger and less wise I tried my hand at it. Once I diagnosed a problem in the fuel line of a friend's car and I repaired what I thought was broken. The next day, while speeding along the interstate, the entire fuel system fell out of the bottom of the car onto the road. The real problem was a loose screw in the carburetor. I have learned that when I have car trouble, I take the trouble to a mechanic. They diagnose and fix problems with cars better than I do. They don't always tell you what you want to hear; it might cost more than you wished, but things really get fixed.

When we pray for others there is a danger that we become too absorbed with the need and begin to think that we are responsible for fixing it. We stay focused on the person whom we are praying for, we become fixated on the disease, the want, the trouble from which they suffer. We shoulder that bit of their trouble and we offer it to God in prayer. The difficulty for us, especially for us doers, achievers and

fixers is that we want to see something done, so perhaps we do a little bit of praying but we can't resist having our very large hand in their trying to make sure things get sorted out the way we think best.

To pray for our own needs and the needs of others is to be with God with our own needs or the needs of someone else on our heart. In the tent of meeting and later in the temple at Jerusalem the high priest would wear a breastplate with twelve jewels representing each of the tribes of Israel - the priest went into the holy of holies wearing this plate over his heart. Literally, he went to God with the people on his heart.

The point of petition and intercession is not to become absorbed in the need or person, but to become absorbed in God. When we are fixated on God and not the need, we rise from prayer at peace because we have seen God and have focused on *his* action. Focus on the person or the need and you rise from prayer just as agitated as when you began. The need is the distraction. God and his action upon the need are the solutions. Too often our prayers for ourselves and for others become little more than worrying in God's presence. So, how do we rise above a kind of pious fretting and enter into true prayer?

In contemplation or adoration we enter into the peace and stillness of God. In petition or intercession we are in the rough and tumble of the world where there is real human, flat-footed need. If our prayers are to be effective in presenting those needs to God, those burdens must be lifted up above the rough and tumble, above all the created order, even above the angels and the saints to find God, to present the need there, to be with him for love's sake, to rest in his changelessness and peace. It's to take our heaviest burdens and the burdens of others into God's presence and leave those petitions and intercessions with him. You do not have to pack out what you packed in to God. You have permission to leave unburdened, trusting that God hears you, knows and understands our needs better than we do, and will act to work good for those who love him. And there is nothing wrong with this. Some have suggested that asking God for stuff is wrong. That's hogwash and it's unbiblical. Jesus himself commends this kind of prayer to us and exemplifies it in his actions here on earth and at the right hand of God in heaven.

Jesus has been a lowly petitioner just like me. On the night he was arrested, Jesus went into a garden to pray. Lifting his mind to God, he expressed his anxiety, and he asked his Father to get him out of the trouble that he was in. He asked, but, by faith, he left the ultimate solution to God. And thank God that he did. He might not have liked the answer he heard to his prayer. "Son, I've diagnosed the problem and the problem is sin, The cost of cleaning up all that sin is going to be steep. Will you pay the price and get it really fixed, or shall I just give you whatever you ask for?"

There was certainly pain involved in the answer to Jesus' prayer. But his submission lead him beyond where we thought God could act and he and we came out on the other side better than we were before; Jesus is glorified and we are saved.

Now, Jesus stands at the right hand of the Father and at this moment is making intercession on our behalf. He has born and is bearing our needs into the presence of God. We are on his heart and he makes continual intercession for us in the presence of his, Our father. And you know what, God is so good and Jesus' intercession is so perfect that they often are about the business of answering prayers that we forget to pray. That is their glory. Our comfort is to enter into their presence, bearing our needs and those of others and disposing of them into the loving and capable hands of God.