

<i>Date Preached</i>	18-Jul-2021	<i>Date Initiated</i>	27-Jun-2021
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Prop 11, Yr B

" Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom,
You know our necessities before we ask ... and our ignorance in asking "



One of the true treasures of the Anglican tradition is the collects that are appointed for each Sunday of the liturgical year.¹ Unless you have the privilege of preaching, however, I fear they go by too quickly to really sink in. And that's unfortunate, for they really do guide and shape our reflections from week-to-week, and when we are attentive to them, they help ensure we explore the full range of our Christian walk-in-faith. (This is why, by the way, we always print them in the bulletin.)

The collects for last week and this week are an excellent example. Last week, we prayed for guidance: that God would grant us the knowledge and understanding of the things we should do, as well as the grace and power to accomplish them—a collect that I might characterize as confident: toward action and intent. *This* week's collect, by contrast, I find a bit more tender. We confide in God that we often really have no idea what we should pray for: to many of our own needs we are blind; and of many others we feel unworthy to ask, and so we don't. Therefore, in today's collect, we pray that God to look past the limitations of our own prayers ... and give us what we *truly* require.

Today's collect really resonates with me. I, like many of you, I'm sure, frequently promise to pray for others, and it's usually relatively easy to know what to pray for: that an illness be cured, that a job be found, that someone in grief be comforted. But sometimes, exactly what to pray for stymies us, doesn't it? Do I pray that a dead-end relationship be lovingly reconciled ... or mercifully dissolved? for the providence to resolve an ethical dilemma ... or the grace of its resolving itself? Over the years, I have cycled through a gamut of prayers for my mother and her dementia. In the face of a long, lingering, incurable disease, do I pray for the mercy of swift progression and a hastened end ... or for the grace of time, so I can be with her as long as possible ... *or* for the acceptance of whatever comes in God's own time?

What I've come to realize, however, is that what may feel to us like a conundrum—not always knowing what to pray for—is *really* an invitation to draw closer to God's presence in our lives. For the true power in prayer is never ours, but God's. And the 'secret' to connecting with God's power lies not in what we pray *for* ... but in the fact that we *pray*. For, you see, two things happen when we pray—especially when we pray regularly and from the very depths of our hearts.

- First, we lift up from the clutter and chaos of our daily lives particular people, events and concerns and, holding them in hands stretched out to Christ, we consciously turn to God. Each of us ... every day ... contends with a stream of duties and obligations and

¹ In fact, there are scores of additional collects in the *BCP*, as well: those for saints' days and various occasions. They are a rich, deep trove of time-tested, common-voiced ways of coming to God in prayer. They are worthy of study—and, even more, of praying! I hope we can, at some point, have a class to familiarize ourselves with these spiritual tools.

worries and concerns and opportunities and decisions that seemingly has no end. They range from the trivial to the tremendous. But because they are all jumbled together in this thing we call "life," we do not always pause to weigh and sort them; to see that some of them are too big—too emotional; too consequential—for us to handle by ourselves.

The discipline of having a regular prayer life ... of harvesting from our jumbled interior the things we need to lift up to God ... underscores that Christian life is never a solo act; that our calling is not to *bear* sorrow or pain or illness or decision on our own, in lonely stoicism ... but instead, to *devote it to God*, in loving dependence. When we tend to the messy garden of our lives and give over to God the things that are too big or too difficult for us, we walk more and more closely with Christ. We know the amazing grace that's saved us isn't *out there* ... or *up there*, somewhere ... but *right here*, inside us.

- Second, the more we experience this grace, in prayer, the more *God-shaped* our lives become. I am convinced ... from long personal experience ... that the things we pray for are not, ultimately, the primary engines of prayer. That may sound funny—perhaps even a little heretical—coming from someone who writes, reads and says prayers for a living, but the plain truth is: We pray not to bend God's will and desire to ours ... but that our wills and desires may be drawn into concert with God's.

Yes, we may ask "please cure" or "please spare" or "please provide" again and again. But when we do so, we our ourselves, like stones in a stream, into the ceaseless flow of God's grace, so God's love and care and mercy can run over us; can smooth and shape and erode and carve us into God's being; ... so that, through prayer, we may come to the total trust in the Father that *Jesus* places in Him. Prayer is not so much a laundry list of things we want God to do for us ... as it is submerging our lives—all our cares and concerns—in the waters of God's sure goodness and letting that goodness turn our hearts to God's own.²

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In the end, David's problem is a lack of prayer. Now the king of a united Israel living in his own palace, David is troubled that God still resides in the same wooden box that the Israelites have been lugging around for the last five hundred years. God, David decides,³ deserves a palace—a temple—of God's own, and I will build it. But the trouble is, David doesn't lift any of this up to God in prayer. He doesn't see this domestication of the Lord as far too big a question to handle by himself ... doesn't let God's grace wash over him. David *tells* God his own plans, rather than letting God in, to mold and shape David's heart to mirror God's will. In neglecting his prayers, the 'stones'

² I am purposely speaking of God's "grace" and "heart" here, and not of God's "will." I do not believe that God wills any of God's people to suffer, in mind, body or estate. Prayer is not some ramp onto God's already-determined and unchangeable causeway of life's events. Rather, through prayer, we take up the perspective of God. We come to see illness and suffering and hard decisions as—yes—this-world realities ... but *also* as passing afflictions in our journey toward the full promise of God in salvation and eternity. We learn (or reaffirm) that whatever we or a loved one may be going through, it is but a waypoint on our (or their) journey to heavenly existence in and of God.

³ In fact, David *tells* God (in the person of the prophet Nathan, God's *nuncio* to David) what David is going to do with God.

that David could have placed in the stream of God's grace remain dry and rough and jagged: a burden David thinks he must carry on his own, rather than an offering, for God to shape and polish.

But God, the fountain of all wisdom, looks past David's weakness and blindness, interposes God's grace and bends David's heart to meet God's own. And God will do the same for us, as well. All we need to do is pray.



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