

Prayer: Empty Chair

Readings Gn 18:20-32; Col 2:12-14; Lk 11:1-13

A man's daughter had asked the local pastor to come and pray with her father. When the pastor arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The priest assumed that the old fellow had been informed of his visit. "I guess you were expecting me," he said. "No, who are you?"

"I'm the new associate at your local church," the pastor replied. "When I saw the empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up."

"Oh yeah, the chair," "I've never told anyone this, not even my daughter," said the man. "But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At church I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it always went right over my head.."

"I abandoned any attempt at prayer," the old man continued, "until one day about four years ago my best friend said to me, 'Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here's what I suggest. Sit down on a chair, place an empty chair in front of you, and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It's not spooky because he promised, 'I'll be with you always.' Then just speak to him and listen in the same way you're doing with me right now."

"So, I tried it and I've liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I'm careful, though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm."

The pastor was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the old guy to continue on the journey. Then he prayed with him, and returned to the church.

Two nights later the daughter called to tell the pastor that her daddy had died that afternoon.

"Did he seem to die in peace?" he asked.

"Yes, when I left the house around two o'clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange. In fact, beyond strange-kind of weird. Apparently, just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on a chair beside the bed."

That story captures the spirit of today's Scripture readings. It also raises several questions: What place does prayer have in our own lives? What does the Gospel say about prayer? What does Jesus say about prayer? We find four different types of prayer described in the Gospel. People sometimes refer to them by the words *ACTS*, which is formed by taking the first letter of each type of prayer: A, adoration; C, contrition; T, Thanksgiving; and S, supplication.

In the prayer of adoration, we acknowledge God as God. For example, in the Gospel of John we find

Thomas falling on his knees and saying to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" John 20:28

In the [prayer of contrition](#), we acknowledge ourselves for what we are: sinners in need of God's mercy.

In the [prayer of thanksgiving](#), we acknowledge God's many gifts to us. Thus we find Jesus himself praying, "Father, Lord of heaven and earth! I thank you . . ." Luke 10:21 (TEV)

Finally, in the [prayer of supplication](#), we acknowledge our need for God's help. Thus we find Jesus teaching his disciples, "Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." Luke 11:9

It is significant that when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, Jesus taught them the Lord's Prayer. This prayer blends together all four prayer types. We adore God, saying, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." We express contrition, saying, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Oddly enough, the Our Father does not contain an explicit reference to thanking God. Scholars explain this by pointing out that Jews regarded the prayer of adoration as a prayer of thanksgiving, also. They reasoned that when we adore God, we acknowledge him for what he is and for what he has done for us.

Implicit in this acknowledgment is our gratitude to him for being what he is and for giving us what he has.

[Finally, supplication is asking God for the things we need.](#) Thus we say in the Our Father, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Sometimes people ask, "Does asking God for things, or asking him to do things, imply that we persuade God to change his mind about doing certain things?" The answer to this question is obviously no. God doesn't need human wisdom to guide him. Nor does he need human persuasion to get him to do what is good and right. Why, then, do we pray for things?

[Blaise Pascal, the famous 17th-century](#) French mathematician, answered that question this way: "Prayer is one of the ways that God chose to share his infinite power with us." Just as God's gift of intelligence gives each one of us power, so his gift of prayer gives us power.

In other words, God set up the universe in such a way that we can influence it not only by the exercise of human intelligence but also by the exercise of human prayer. Not every person can influence human affairs by the power of his or her intelligence.

But every person—even one with a low I.Q.— can influence human affairs by the power of prayer that God shares with us. God has made us more than spectators to his creative power. He has given us a share in it. This is part of what it means to be made in the "image and likeness" of God.

[Alexis Carrel, the Nobel prize winning surgeon](#), summed up the power and role of prayer this way: "Prayer is a mature activity indispensable to the fullest development of personality. Only in prayer do we achieve that complete and harmonious assembly of body, mind, and spirit which gives the frail human reed unshakeable strength."

Let's close with a prayer of supplication to Jesus: Voice of Jesus, call us when we stray. Eyes of Jesus, look upon us when we need encouragement. Face of Jesus, smile upon us when we need assurance. Hands of Jesus, anoint us when we grow weary. Arms of Jesus, lift us up when we stumble.