

Sermon for 24 July 2011  
Pentecost 6; Proper 12, Year A

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of  
the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are few things as potentially amusing and  
as potentially instructive as listening to a small  
child pray. It is typically a mix of both the  
amusingly selfish and the inspiringly selfless,  
expressing those two truths about all Christians  
(namely, our transformation into new people in  
Baptism and our constant struggle with our old,  
creaturely obsession with self) which we adults are  
usually too clever to make so obvious.

If you have a child and you've not listened in  
on his or her prayers before bedtime (which I hope  
children still do) I would encourage you to do so.  
You'll likely hear some rather selfish stuff—  
prayers for a new bicycle or a less irritating  
sibling—but you'll likely also hear some rather  
moving examples of Christian charity: prayers for

sick friends, for mom and dad, for that sibling (despite how irritating he might be), and so forth.

As I said, we adults are clever enough to monitor the prayers we give around others. But how often in our private conversations with God do we forget to ask ourselves if we're really praying aright? There are two prayers from our *Book of Common Prayer* which are directed for use as concluding collects for the Prayers of the People which I think we are wise to think about. One asks God to "Accept and fulfill our petitions, we pray, not as we ask in our ignorance, nor as we deserve in our sinfulness, but as [He] know[s] and love[s] us in [His] Son," and the other asks God to "Help us to ask only what accords with [His] will; and those good things which we dare not, or in our blindness cannot ask, [to] grant us for the sake of [His] Son Jesus Christ our Lord."

How often do we fail to consider the fact that God may know what's best for His people? How often

do we pray without reflection for personal benefits and even for the benefit of self at the expense of others?

A little over a decade ago, a very popular book called *The Prayer of Jabez* came out. It was written by a fellow named Bruce Wilkinson, and he based the book on a rather obscure passage from 1 Chronicles. So popular was this volume that three versions for children of different ages were released in the years following its publication. And what did this book instruct its readers to do? To pray very specifically for personal benefits in the areas of finances, social influence, and the like. Throughout the volume is an unstated assumption that God ought to respond to man's desires rather than the other way round. Sadly, whether we want to acknowledge it or not, the popularity of this book and of the "prosperity Gospel" more broadly suggests that it is very easy to pray for oneself

unreflectively, to forget those bits from the prayerbook about our difficulty in praying aright.

In this morning's Old Testament lesson we are introduced to a figure better than most in regards to being reflective in prayer. At Gibeon the Lord seems to give Solomon a blank check, as it were: "Ask what I shall give you," he says. God forbid that He should say the same thing to me. I'd probably ask for a trust fund and a vacation home. But Solomon responds, "Give thy servant therefore an understanding mind to govern thy people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to govern this thy great people?" Solomon prays that he may have the gifts to serve God's people, rather than for "long life, or riches, or the lives of [his] enemies," and for this God grants Solomon's request.

Of course, not all prayers for ourselves are selfish, and we don't have to pray only for God to give us gifts to do His work (though, this is one

thing we should always pray for). It is perfectly appropriate to cry out to God in our distress and ask for relief. When we are ill or sad or frightened, God is ready to hear us. The danger is when we cannot see past ourselves, past our own needs and desires, to see how God might be needed in the lives of others, and how we might, through prayer, be given strength to reach out to those in need of His Grace.

The difficult truth, though, is that we'll never be so adept at discerning the complex motivations that do battle in our souls to become perfect in prayer. Unless you're a lot more self-aware than I, prayer will always include at least a hint of self-interest. Does this mean it's a losing battle, that we may as well not pray? By no means! We hear in Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* the good news that we who have been redeemed, who have been regenerated in Baptism, have a prayer-partner who

prays for us and in us and who finally perfects the complex, tortuous words we offer up to the Almighty:

[W]e do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Remain steadfast in prayer, then, with confidence that God will hear and answer us "not as we ask in our ignorance, nor as we deserve in our sinfulness, but as [He] know[s] and love[s] us in [His] Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" and that the Spirit which gives us the words we need has given us the strength to say those blessed words against which even the Gates of Hell cannot triumph: God the Father has made us His sons and daughters through Jesus Christ and loves us and listens to us as any father should: with compassion and understanding and an overwhelming desire that we should live in peace and felicity all the days of our lives and in eternity with the Triune God. Amen.