

HEARING THE OUR FATHER WITH NEW EARS

Yesterday I celebrated Mass for some longtime parishioners who were celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. They had their children and grandchildren present in the Mary Chapel and they renewed their vows and there was a family blessing for all at the end. It was beautiful and moving and joyous. And the bride got to kiss the groom! I was happy and excited for the couple.

The night before I was involved with a Sleep Lab at Abington Hospital. Early in the study they entered my room and put a CPAP apparatus on my nose. For 90 minutes I was unable to sustain sleep and kept waking up. The mask blew air into my nostrils and from 11:30 to 5AM I slept straight through without a break. I really felt replenished and well-rested for the first time in a long time. After the ceremony was over one of the man's sons came into the sacristy specifically to thank me. But he said: "Thank you for the way you prayed and the way you celebrated Mass for my mom and dad. Your passion and intimacy made a big difference." But I wasn't aware of praying any differently than I usually do but I admit I definitely felt more energized.

But the truth is that we do sometimes notice things—in others. The disciples noticed Jesus in his praying. They knew how to pray. They prayed with him many times. But perhaps Jesus had a really good night's sleep and there was something about the way he prayed that touched them, appealed to them. Something they sensed was there in him but not there in them. You know, we are funny about prayer. We hear readings like today, "Ask and you shall receive." We ask and we don't receive. So then we try to process what that means.

We might think there is something wrong with us, something is lacking or faulty in our prayer or the way we are praying or maybe, it's what we are asking for although we usually only ask for good things. Not even always for ourselves. Sometimes we think that our prayer isn't as important to God or not as important as another person's prayer is. Sometimes we are aware of our past sin and wonder why God would bother to listen to us anyway after what we had done. Maybe the answer was: "No." and that's that. Aren't we allowed to keep asking even after we get a "No. answer?"

No matter our past sins we can always turn to God and ask for forgiveness. It is the last thing he said to us from the cross. We can ask for forgiveness even for the same sins. Over and over. It's interesting that Jesus speaks of the importance of persistence in our prayer. If you think about it though, you only have to persist when something hasn't happened. If something has happened we no longer have to ask. But it seems Our Lord is telling us something about prayer. It takes place over time and we have to keep at it. Jesus is saying that the very nature of prayer demands that we keep at it.

Do you think all of Our Lord's prayers were answered right away or were answered with a "Yes?" How about in the Garden of Gethsemane when he is afraid of all that waits him and is about to befall him? "Father, take this cup away from me..." But the Father doesn't. And there is no voice from heaven in that moment, only the Father's silence—and at the hour of his Son's greatest need. And the Son goes to his death, a grueling death—not saved from the pain, not spared the cruel mockery, not freed from the death. It is the same Jesus who said "Ask and you

will receive.” But it is also that same Jesus who is raised from the dead never more to die. Prayer answered. He drank the cup and we have all been saved. And here’s the point. In Gethsemane Jesus prays “Not my will but thine be done.” Isn’t that the point he makes in the Our Father too? “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.” Prayer begins with God. We recognize our relationship. We open ourselves to God’s presence and God’s will. Then we can ask for the daily bread and the forgiveness and so forth.

Ask yourself if that is actually how you pray (I’m not talking about when we are reciting the Our Father). Do you typically just launch into what you want from God? Do you take the time to acknowledge who God is, that God is, that God’s will is the very best thing for us—always? Then begin to ask for what you want? That is what Jesus did. That is what he taught his disciples—and us. Why don’t we embrace that in our prayers from now on?