

Teach us to pray: Luke 11:1-13

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [July 13, 2010](#) issue

In one of the most famous sermons ever delivered, John Donne described the challenge of retaining concentration during prayer. The year was 1626. The occasion was the funeral sermon for Sir William Cockayne.

I throw myself down in my chamber, and I call in and invite God and his angels thither; and when they are there, I ignore God and his angels for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door; I talk on . . . sometimes I find that I forgot what I was about, but when I began to forget it, I cannot tell. A memory of yesterday's pleasures, a fear of tomorrow's dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine ear, a light in mine eye, an any thing, a nothing, a fancy, a chimera in my brain, troubles me in my prayer.

I've never thought of myself as an "as though" pray-er before, but if I take Donne's experience to heart, I know I am. I can talk on in prayer with eyes closed and all the time-tested postures of devotion in place. I can behave as though I were praying to God, yet I cannot remember where the prayer began. Even worse, I find that I'm capable of forgetting what I am about. This is not a good situation, nor a spiritually admirable one.

These days it may be a mosquito instead of a fly, or the rumble of a Harley instead of a stagecoach. It could be the ding of the e-mail inbox instead of a squeaky door. Distraction is the issue. How do we hold our concentration in prayer when our multisensory world and multitasking brains keep creating new strains of attention deficit? Doesn't God deserve to capture the reverence of our every synapse?

When the disciples asked, "Lord, teach us to pray," their request had nothing to do with learning some revolutionary technique. These were Galilean Jews, each devout in his own way. They knew how to pray. Spreading their hands in upward devotion or lying prone with face to the ground were second-nature practices. These prayer habits were not fancy secrets their ancestors forgot to pass along. Prayer postures were no more complicated in that day than they are today. So what were they really

asking of Jesus?

I am guessing that these disciples were as feeble at concentration as we are. They had lives to lead, worries to forget and preoccupations that nagged. One too many prayers of not being able to remember where the prayer actually began, or what the prayers were about, and they were lost. An “any thing, a nothing, [or] a fancy” could have put them over the edge.

But something even more troubling must have prompted their request. A sense of inadequate faith had to play a role. Jesus’ companions continuously witnessed his special attachment to the Father. Their relational bond was strong enough to welcome even the most intimate of expression—Abba. The Twelve yearned for similar closeness. Behind their simple request was a longing: “Lord, teach us how to love and trust the Father the way you do, that our prayer lives would increase in fullness and honesty.”

Technique wasn’t their problem, confident faith was. If you want to get better at prayer, it’s a good idea to work on the central relationships in your life. As one spiritual friend put it, “We are only as good at praying as we are at the other relationships of our lives.” If every good relationship revolves around a strong desire to be with somebody else, these disciples were hungry for a desire to know God in a deep way. Until they could realize for themselves some semblance of the deep bond Jesus enjoyed with the Father, their best prayer practices were irrelevant.

Dominican priest Herbert McCabe suggested that the major reason for our distraction in prayer is that we often pray for things we don’t really want. It may sound “nice” or “religious” to pray high-mindedly about a whole assortment of things. But do we really care about those things? “Distractions are nearly always your real wants breaking in on your prayer for edifying but bogus wants,” says McCabe. “If you are distracted, trace your distraction back to the real desires it comes from and pray about these. When you are praying for what you really want you will not be distracted. People on sinking ships do not complain of distractions during their prayer.”

If McCabe is right, the disciples were fascinated with Jesus’ prayer focus and yearned to know God at a depth comparable to Jesus’ own experience. But did these disciples really care about the sorts of things for which they were praying? Or was there a “chimera in [their] brain” that John Donne and so many others of us know all too well—the fanciful illusion that we’re automatically in touch with God the minute we

close our eyes and fold our hands?