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Since I last saw you all in May, I've been spending most of my days completing my Clinical Pastoral Education requirement. A standard part of ministry formation across many denominations and traditions, CPE is essentially an internship in which seminarians serve for a time as hospital chaplains. It was my good fortune to have met Debra at St. Francis and so I've been completing my CPE under her care at Norwalk Hospital. I went into CPE feeling nervous and overwhelmed and, truthfully, woefully unprepared for the work. Walking unannounced into a hospital patient's room and introducing yourself as a chaplain can yield a wide range of reactions: some are terrified (thinking that chaplains only come when there is bad news), others are grateful; many think that because they don't identify as "religious" in the traditional sense of the word then there's nothing a chaplain can do for them. I just desperately wanted a script; some sort of playbook. In a throwback to last week's Gospel...my inner-Martha would rear her head and I would become worried and anxious about finding the perfect words that could ease the patient's pain and assure her that God was present, even in her suffering.

More than anything, I wanted to be able to *pray* with the patients. To me, it seemed like the best thing I could offer them. And I suppose there may have been a time when you could walk into a hospital patient's room and offer spiritual care without getting funny looks or without making the potential recipient of your offer just a little bit uncomfortable. But given how much we hear these days about the decline of religion in

this country, it probably comes as no surprise to you that many, I might say a majority, of the patients I see are not a part of a faith community and do not consider themselves to be people of faith. But one of the most pleasant surprises for me has been that, while most patients may be initially skeptical of a chaplain, and while most of them may not be interested to talk about God or their relationship with God or anything about their faith (or lack thereof), a great majority of them *are* very happy for me to pray for them. Whether or not they see themselves as a person of faith, or think of themselves as “religious,” there seems to exist across the diverse and varied patient population a great openness to prayer, and even a desire to be prayed for. This openness to prayer, I think, speaks to an intrinsic desire and longing for God... an innate hunger that lies within most human beings to believe that there is something bigger than they are...even if they don’t have a clear sense of what that “something bigger” is. For many, it would seem, the most logical and familiar way to enter into this mystery is through prayer.

My initial gratitude that so many patients were open to the idea of prayer quickly gave way to apprehensions about *how* to pray. You may be interested to know that our Prayer Book catechism defines prayer this way: “Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.” This is a rather expansive definition of prayer. The mere fact that prayer doesn’t have to include words immediately expands the possibilities. But for many Episcopalians, myself included, our idea of prayer is probably centered in our liturgy and the beautiful, familiar prayers that comprise our many rites and orders of worship. And while there’s certainly nothing wrong with relying on the prayer book, it does mean that many of us will find it challenging to pray in our own voice, using our own words. The prayer book has many individual prayers for the sick as

well as entire rites for ministering to the sick. But situations at the hospital often call for something more spontaneous and more specific to the patient's individual circumstances. With this in mind, one of my top "learning goals" for this summer was to increase my comfort level with extemporaneous prayer, and I found myself coming before God with the very same petition as the disciple from this morning's Gospel reading – "Lord, teach me to pray..."

I am pleased to say that two months of praying extemporaneously several times a day has greatly increased my comfort level with this type of prayer...which tells me that, as in so many things, the combination of practice and a willingness to step outside our comfort zones and trust God can grow and enrich our prayer lives! In fact, one of the real and unexpected joys of this hospital ministry has been the exposure I've gained to the many different ways that other people pray. One of my new favorite things is to pray for people from more evangelical traditions who, while being prayed for, will typically offer sporadic utterances of "Yes, Lord!" or "Praise, Jesus!" or "Come, Holy Spirit!" You won't believe how much more confidence, stamina and creativity you can have for extemporaneous prayer when someone is cheering you on!

As much as I've come to feel more comfortable with extemporaneous prayer, each time I pray for and with patients, I find myself increasingly grateful for the Lord's Prayer. I inevitably conclude my prayers by saying, "Now, in the words our Savior Jesus Christ taught us to pray..." and proceed to say the Lord's Prayer. It is, I've found, the perfect coda to any prayer. Nine times out of 10, the patient and anyone else present will join in, and in this way our prayers are united and we are brought closer together. In these experiences, I find that the existence of one universal prayer that almost all Christians

know gives rise to a powerful sense of unity and shared identity as children of God. It breathes life into Jesus' promise to us that "...where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

For me, the more challenging part of today's Gospel reading comes in the section after Jesus teaches us the prayer we are to pray. "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." Again, my experiences in the hospital this summer have forced me to confront some uncomfortable feelings about this scriptural assurance. Many of us will hear in these verses a promise that if we petition God with enough fervor, if we are persistent enough in our prayers, if we ask, search and knock on the door hard enough and with enough heart, our prayers will be answered. But I simply cannot believe that the patients who confront great suffering, or the families and friends who are forced to watch them suffer, are in these situations because they didn't pray hard enough or pray the right way. Undoubtedly all of us here have found ourselves in situations of loss, suffering or despair and left wondering why our prayers went unanswered. This is, I believe, one of the great mysteries of our faith and the only way I can make sense of it is to look really closely at our understanding of what prayer is and what happens in prayer. I found one particular preacher's take on this to be really helpful. He warned against the danger of thinking about prayer in terms of a vending machine...this idea that if we put the right amount of change in the slot, and push a button, we will receive exactly what we've ordered. Inevitably, there will come a time when the machine eats our change, or gives us the wrong soda, and when this happens, we will get angry...resentful...we may

even kick the machine and try to force it to release the beverage we ordered. I don't know why this happens...why some prayers appear to be answered while others are not. But if what I believe to be true about God is true, that God loves us as all as God's beloved children, equally and unconditionally, it simply can't be that some prayers appear to go unanswered because someone didn't pray hard enough, or with enough heart, or because they were undeserving of having their prayers answered.

But even if we know, intellectually, that we are all beloved as God's children, it's natural that when our prayers go unanswered we may feel like God has shunned us, or abandoned us, and it becomes really difficult to pray. But we shouldn't hide from God or try to bottle our resentment and anger and keep it from him. After all, the God who knit us in our mother's womb and knows our needs and desires before we ask already knows when we are angry or hurt. Being angry with God, or crying out to God that we feel abandoned...these laments are kinds of prayer too, and important ones. And when we find ourselves completely unable to pray, it's then that being in Christian community becomes so important, because it's here that we learn to pray for each other. When we simply can't muster the will to pray...when it's just too hard...it is then that our brothers and sisters in the faith support and carry us with their prayers. Perhaps in these times when we struggle to pray, we should remember what the Prayer Book teaches us about prayer: that it does not have to involve words. Humble silence before God may be both the only prayer and the best prayer we can offer. I'm reminded of Mary, from last week's Gospel, who chose the "better part" by sitting humbly and silently at our Lord's feet and listening to his word.

The idea that words are not always necessary is something else that has been reinforced for me by my experiences in the hospital this summer. My initial obsession to come up with just the right words to say to a patient to ease her suffering and assure her of God's presence was quickly tempered when I learned that there is little I can say to the family that has made the heart-wrenching decision to remove life support from their loved one in a drug-induced coma... and there are no words that will erase the trauma of a family who has just lost their newborn child. In these situations and others like them, it's not about any words or prayer I can come up with but, rather, the act of simply being present with people in their suffering. Sometimes, the prayer of sitting in God's presence in silence, one child of God with another, is all the prayer that we can muster. And I have to think that in those times, that is more than enough.

Of all the times Jesus prayed in the Gospels, for me, the most powerful is the prayer he prayed on the night before he died in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was then that our Lord, who took on our human form so that he might know our suffering, cried out in his own prayer of desperation and lament: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." This is perhaps one of the hardest prayers we can ever pray, because it means giving over all control, all outcomes, all of our life to God. It means accepting that praying is not like putting money in a vending machine. It means we're turning to God in prayer not, first and foremost, because we *want something from* God...but because, quite simply, *we need God*. We need the God who did not abandon his Son to death on the cross but who raised him to new life in the resurrection and, in so doing, gave us abiding and eternal hope that our unanswered

prayers will not go unanswered forever...hope that in the last day, all of our prayers will be answered when we are united with Christ in eternal life.

"He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray...'" In a few moments, we will say the prayer our Lord taught the disciples that day, continuing a centuries-old tradition that unites us to all those prayerful souls who have gone before us and those who will follow. We say it so often that it can become rote...the words roll so effortlessly off of our lips that we can fail to really hear them. Today, let us pray these words as if we're paying them for the first time. Let us hear them anew and ponder them in our hearts. Let us offer them with all that we are to the God who created us, who sustains us and who gives us new life. *Amen.*