

Sermon for Proper 12C—Turning and Prayer  
St. John's, Gloucester  
July 24, 2022  
M Lise Hildebrandt

How many of you have had long-term relationships—relationships that last years? I should see every hand up. And in those relationships, how many of you have had one with no problems—no bumps in the road, no disagreements, misunderstandings, conflicts, hurt feelings, disappointment? I should see NO hands up now.

Relationships are hard, and we constantly mess up in them. Even in the strongest and best relationships, there are conflicts. This is true with **every** relationship, even our relationship with God. You know how the Old Testament is really long, like 12 or 14 hundred pages long? I can summarize it in a few sentences: God chooses the Hebrew people and says, "I choose you to be my people. I will love and bless you; just love me and follow these guidelines and all will be well." And they do for a little while, and then they don't, and bad things happen and eventually they turn to God and call for help and promise to follow God and God comes and rescues them. And then it happens all over again. The End. Sure it's more nuanced than that, but that's the essence.

The Old Testament lesson today from Hosea is particularly explicit about what happens when the people pull away from God. The prophet Hosea is commanded by God to go and marry a prostitute named Gomer and have children with her. This is to symbolize God's marriage to the people of Israel, who are whores chasing after other gods, not the Lord God of Israel. Through the naming of the children, God signifies the coming disaster and God's own disgust at the relationship. "Jezreel" was the site of a great slaughter, which God says will come again upon the people of Israel. Lo-ruhamah means that God will have no pity on God's people. And Lo-ammi means the Israelites are no longer God's own beloved. They have played the whore and God is done. Ready to break up, get a divorce.

And yet . . . the passage ends with a note of hope. Eventually, the people will be once again God's own. God is not willing to truly end the relationship; even through her anger she turns back to her people. The purpose of the prophet is to call to the people, invite them to change and turn back to God, their true love, the one who will stay faithful no matter what they do.

Relationship is not easy. No matter how committed we are, we have to change, bend, grow, turn back to the other again and again. Sometimes, the relationship is just too hard and we leave. Sometimes we are left. If we take seriously our relationship to God, we will find this same dynamic, except that God will never leave. We need to turn back, change, bend, keep falling back in love with our Beloved.

That's why we have weekly worship. To steep ourselves in the relationship, hearing the Word, singing hymns, praying prayers, confessing our sins, eating Eucharist. Equally important is what we do the other six days of the week. Daily prayer is what nourishes our relationship to God. Without it we may be acquaintances of God and Jesus, but we aren't really friends or lovers.

Jesus gives us a simple but surprisingly thorough way to pray in what we call the Lord's Prayer. It starts: Father, really "Daddy," hallowed be your name. To hallow is to make holy or sacred. So hallowing the name of God means putting God above all other relationships. Saying: God, you are the greatest. Your kingdom come—some people use the word "kindom" or "community"—your presence come, breaking into our world and making our relationships infused with your Spirit! Your will be done—you know what is right and good—bring it to us and into our world. Give us our daily bread—we look to you to provide what we need each day—physical food AND spiritual food.

Forgive us our sins and help us forgive those who sin against us. We're going to mess up and we're going to get hurt and angry at others who hurt us. We need help in both these areas—we need your forgiveness when we mess up and we need your help in repairing broken relationships and letting go of our hurts and grudges towards others. Save us from the time of trial—or lead us not into temptation—keep us from the worst ways we can hurt ourselves and others and get lost from you. The Lord's Prayer may be so familiar that we just say it by rote, not really even thinking about it. But if we truly pray it, meaning it, living into it, we will find our relationship to God deepened. Daily. Do we honor God as the greatest? What food do we need this day? Do we believe that God will provide it? Where do we need forgiveness? What hurts or grudges are we holding onto; what help do we need to let go? Where are we most in danger right now for losing faith or going down a dark path?

Daily we must turn to God. Daily we must keep praying, keep trying, keep loving.

Jesus gives these little stories following the prayer to emphasize persistence—the man who was in bed didn't want to get up and help his friend, but he would respond to his persistence. Be persistent in prayer—knocking on God's door for the help and bread that you need. And God will reward that persistence, because God knows what we need. It is interesting that Jesus doesn't just say that God will give you what you ask for, but that the heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.

That's curious. Does that mean that no matter what you ask for, if you ask for it sincerely, you'll get the Holy Spirit? What if you asked for a job or healing for your spouse or help for your community? I interpret this to mean that the Holy Spirit is the best gift of all, so no matter what we ask for, God is willing to do even better and send the Holy Spirit. Because what does the Holy Spirit do? The Holy Spirit guides and directs and comforts and strengthens and heals and gives us power and understanding and abilities to speak and do good. Whatever we need, the Holy Spirit can make it happen. That's why the HS is the best gift of all. We might think of God as eternal and unchangeable, but the Holy Spirit is the part of God always moving, changing and bringing new life—the God that is actively involved in the details of our lives.

Try praying to the Holy Spirit. I especially pray to the Holy Spirit when I am lost—literally and figuratively. Turn to the Holy Spirit and the Holy spirit will turn you the way you need to go.

I pray for St. John's. I pray for myself here, that I will be led in the way that creates the most life for this church and for me. And no matter what I pray for, the Holy Spirit keeps showing up. Just before Easter, the search committee and vestry met for the morning to contemplate the future of St. John's. Through worship, prayer and conversation, they wrestled with the real challenges facing the church, speaking with love and pain and honesty. And what surfaced was a sense that, to

paraphrase Monty Python: "We're not dead yet!" There was some energy and openness to trying new things, to thinking outside the box. The Spirit showed up.

And then, as we put together a "visioning team" to figure out a way forward. I was aware of the Genesis II program through the Episcopal Church, that helps churches refocus and redevelop. But before we held our first meeting, Sarah Larsen forwarded the BTS Center program on Fostering Imagination, about a week before the application was due. So on a Tuesday in May, we gathered by Zoom to try to discern which, if either, program to follow. There was lots of discussion, going in all different directions, sometimes seeming to go off on tangents, often raising good concerns and good ideas. Finally, as time went on, I feared there would be no agreement or clarity. So I called the question. I said, "Tonight we are trying to decide whether to go with the Genesis program, or to apply to the BTS Center program, or to do neither. Only speak for yourself, how you are leaning or being led." And each did. And all I can say is, the Holy Spirit showed up and knocked my socks off! There was amazing clarity and agreement to go with the BTS Center, to at least apply to see if we could get in. And we did and we did. And the energy and creativity keeps flowing. Pretty cool!

Relationship with God is not easy. We forget, we get busy, we get discouraged. But God is ALWAYS here, ready to send the Holy Spirit, ready to engage, provide, forgive. Turn to God daily, pray deeply the Lord's Prayer, knowing that this is where will find what we need. Let us pray.

Amen.