



Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time July 24, 2016 C

“LORD, MAKE UP THERE COME DOWN HERE.”

In his book entitled *God Is Closer Than You Think*, Presbyterian pastor John Ortberg has an interesting reflection on the following part of the Lord’s Prayer:

*Our Father in heaven...
your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth
as it is in heaven.*

Ortberg says that Jesus is telling us to pray, “Bring heaven down here,” or “Make up there come down here.” So we might ask ourselves the question: “Where or how do I want to see God’s presence and power break into my world? Where would I especially like God to use me to make things down here run the way they do up there?” Then Ortberg tells the following amazing story:

“God, make up there come down here.” **Three women** from the church I serve prayed this prayer one day. They were on a women’s retreat, but they were playing hooky from a session that was being taught by my wife, and they started dreaming together about being “kingdom-bringers.” Eventually they came to one of our pastors, called “J.D.,” and told him about their dreams.

“What do you want to do?” he asked. They told him they wanted to save all the babies in Africa.

J.D. told them that was kind of big for a starter project, so would they be willing to begin by trying to spend a day helping out an under-resourced school?

So the women started to pray: “God, make up there come down here for this little school in East Palo Alto.” In our area, one of the big hedges is the Route 101 freeway that separates East Palo Alto from Palo Alto. Palo Alto is the home of Stanford University and Silicon Valley; it was listed recently in *Forbes Magazine* as the number one area in the world to live in if you want to get rich. East Palo Alto is an under-resourced community right next door; a few years ago it led the nation in murders per capita.

*This group of women schemed and prayed and planned and came up with a challenge: How about **having one thousand people** from our church give up a day to plant trees and tile floors and paint murals at this school?*

I didn’t think there was any way we could get a thousand people to do this, but I said I would announce it and see what happens. We ended up having to cut off sign-ups at twelve hundred people because we couldn’t handle any more volunteers. The best part was watching God present and at work in ways none of us could have planned.

A young coed was visiting our church from college and heard about this plan. Not only did she want to come, but when she went back to school and told her sorority, they wanted to come too. So we ended up with over a thousand people from our church—and thirty sorority sisters. This meant that scores of single young males suddenly felt God prompting them to serve also.

Some people were talking to an East Palo Alto city official about this at a Starbucks, and he told the store manager, “You ought to donate enough coffee for all these people on Saturday morning.”

And the Starbucks guy said, “Okay.”

The city official decided to go for broke: “You ought to deliver it too.”

And the Starbucks guy said, “Okay.”

The three women went to Home Depot. They had no titles or credentials, just a conviction that God would help them ‘bring up there to down here.’ They told the Home Depot guy what they were up to, and then said: “We need \$10,000 worth of equipment. We don’t have any money for this—you ought to just donate it.”

And the Home Depot guy said, “Okay.”

So they got \$10,000 worth of material free.

They were talking to a woman who doesn’t attend the church. By now you can fill in the conversational

details by yourself: the school ended up getting \$20,000 worth of playground material for free.

For a whole day there was music blaring and balloons flying and five-year-olds serving next to eighty-five-year-olds and people working together from churches of every stripe and ethnicity. It was the single most joyous day I have seen a church have. Those of us who served were blessed far beyond those we offered services to. And it was because of a single prayer: "Help us make up there come down here." These three women have actually adopted a **mission statement** for their friendship that leaves the mission statements I have seen for most churches and corporations all behind: "To identify our neighbors' greatest needs, and surprise our church into hilarious giving by providing impactful, totally happenin' and celebratory opportunities to serve."

God's Costly Presence

Sometimes offering yourself as a vessel for the presence and work of God is costly. Richard Felix has recently written one of the most moving books I have read in a long time, **The School of Dying Graces**. He writes of his wife's long, terminal struggle with breast cancer. She endured all the tortures that might promise healing: a lumpectomy, three rounds of chemotherapy, a double mastectomy, radiation of the lungs and brain, a bone marrow transplant, a miracle drug, and experimental therapies.

After almost two years of this agony, her oncologist told her that the Beast (which is what Vivian called her cancer) would win. She could expect to live four to six more weeks.

Vivian and Richard went to their favorite ocean-view restaurant, which had been the setting for so much of their life together and now would be the setting for the beginning of the end. She told him she needed to prepare to die. She asked if he would take responsibility for praying for a miracle, so that she could turn her focus away from the disease and onto the presence of God.

"I plan to enroll," she told him, "in the school of dying graces."

Richard writes of how difficult it was to see her enter "her personal Gethsemane, a place of great suffering that became holy ground for her most intimate encounters with God. I could not follow her there, though I longed to do so with every cell in my body." Yet, in a way, in choosing to take her suffering on himself, he did enter his own Gethsemane. He entered into the highest kind of love, the love that Jesus suffered, the love that embraces suffering for the sake of the beloved.

One June day in the year 2000, Vivian Felix's battle with cancer ended. And now she knows.

"God, make up there come down here." This was essentially Richard's prayer. It did not get answered in the way he wanted. The full healing of heaven did not descend to Vivian's body. But in their love for each other, in their prayerfully embraced suffering for each other, there was an expression of love that no cancer could ever defeat. And in the love he gave them, God made down here a little more like up there.

God, make up there come down here.

It can happen. Every time you are in conflict with someone, want to hurt them, gossip about them, or avoid them, but instead go to them and seek reconciliation and forgiveness—

The kingdom is breaking into this world.

Every time you have a chunk of money and decide to give sacrificially to somebody who is hungry or homeless or poor—

The kingdom is breaking into the world.

Anytime someone has an addiction and wants to partner with God so much that they're willing to stop hiding, acknowledge the truth, and get help from a loving community—

The kingdom is breaking into the world.

Every time a workaholic parent decides to stop idolizing their job, rearranges their life to begin to love and care for the little children entrusted to them—

The kingdom is breaking into the world.

Every time you love, every time you include someone who's lonely, every time you encourage someone who's defeated, every time you challenge somebody who's wandering off the path, every time you serve the under-resourced—

It is a sign that the kingdom is once more breaking into the world.

When Jesus entered humanity, when the baby was laid in the manger, the kingdom of God had a tiny little beachhead in this world. He formed a little community; and when he left, there was a toehold in Jerusalem. Then it started to spread—to Judea, to Samaria, to Athens, to Rome. To every country. From ancient cathedrals in England to underground house churches in China to storefront churches in inner-city Detroit.

One day a little beachhead got formed in your life. It doesn't matter whether your life seems messy to you. It doesn't matter if you don't fully understand how the kingdom works. Someone has come from the other side of the hedge. And he uses you and me. He lives in our backyard now.

(End of excerpt from *God Is Closer Than You Think*)

Six lessons about prayer from today's readings

As we reflect on the first and third readings today, we can learn the following lessons on prayer:

- Address God as Abba or Loving Father. When praying, we need to remember that we are in the presence of a loving Father, even if we do not feel much love coming from him.
- Like Abraham, we should be honest and direct with God about our needs and feelings.
- Like Abraham, we should be humble before God.
- Try to accept God's response to our prayer even if it is not what we had hoped for. Despite Abraham's pleadings, Sodom went up in smoke.

- We learn that we should often ask for our daily bread, for forgiveness, for protection from the evil one and for the kingdom to come.
- Persevere—don't quit. Remember: God's timing is not your timing.

Just don't pray. Also act to make things happen.

An old saying regarding prayer states:

Pray as if everything depended on God,
Act as if everything depended on yourself.

The following cute little story is a great example of prayer and action working side-by-side.

A little girl was telling her father about how some of the boys in the neighborhood had set traps to catch birds. He asked her what she did about it. "I prayed that the traps might not catch the birds," she said. "Anything else?" her father asked. "I prayed that God would keep the birds out of the traps." "Anything else?" "When the boys weren't looking I went and kicked all the traps to pieces."

We shouldn't just pray for better health; we should do everything possible to improve our health with medicine, exercise, etc. We shouldn't just pray for God to change our spouse or friend; we should do everything possible to be a better spouse and friend.

We shouldn't just pray for someone to come to church and be a better Christian; daily we should try to be a better witness of Christian living and invite that person to come to church with us.

A word on prayer from St. Thérèse of Lisieux

*I have not the courage to search
through books for beautiful prayers,
unable either to say them all
or choose between them.
I do as a child would do who cannot read—
I say just what I want to say to God,
quite simply,
and He never fails to understand.*

A cute story

St. Benedict was riding horseback from one monastery to the next. He passed a beggar, who snarled: "If I had a horse, I could pray, too!" Benedict smiled, "Friend, if you can pray the Lord's Prayer without getting distracted, I will give you this horse." The beggar jumped right on "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.... Does the saddle come with it?"

When prayer changes the prayer

Shortly before bedtime, a little boy lost one of his favorite marbles—a large, colorful one. After searching for it unsuccessfully, the boy approached his father in tears, saying, "Can I pray and ask God to help me find my marble?" The father agreed, and they both closed their eyes for prayer.

With all of the innocence and great faith of a child, the boy prayed, "Dear God, please, please help me find my favorite marble."

The next day, the father was afraid to ask his son if he had found the marble. He was concerned that the boy's sincere faith would be hurt if, after praying, he could not locate the marble. Nevertheless, the father gently asked, "Did you find the marble, son?"

"No," replied the boy, "but God made me not want to care about it anymore."

Lord, teach us to pray

Lord Jesus, teach me how to pray.

You alone can teach me as you taught your disciples. I sincerely wish to pray well and to grow in friendship with you, but I do not know how to pray as I ought.

Lord, give me a deep sense of the need that is in me to remain quietly in your presence long enough to hear what you are saying to me.

Convince me deeply of the power of prayer and of the truth that it is your Spirit within me that will make my prayers powerful.

Lord, give me an expectant faith.

Fill me with confidence that with you as my teacher I can really learn to pray well in spite of my own nothingness.

Let me be convinced that you will reveal to me all I need to know in order to pray well.

Give me such deep confidence in the power of prayer that I will welcome opportunities to pray for others.

Take away all human respect so that I may stand joyfully beside all who ask me for prayers and speak out the words of prayer to you in their presence.

Let me grow ever more aware that you, Lord Jesus, are alive in me, and that all my prayers are full of power for good because they are your prayers spoken through me.

Have blessed week,

Le Sarah

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

GOD IS PERFECT LOVE AND PERFECT WISDOM. WE DO NOT PRAY IN ORDER TO CHANGE HIS WILL BUT TO BRING OUR WILLS INTO HARMONY WITH HIS.

William Temple