

Let Us Pray
1 Thessalonians 5:13b-25
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Peter Beskendorf was known as the master barber of Wittenberg. In the early 16th century that is. And his most famous client was none other than Martin Luther himself. As more than one writer I read this week pointed out, because Luther had a price on his head, Beskendorf was clearly in a position to capitalize on it, since he regularly took a razor to Luther's neck.

But Beskendorf and Luther became friends, chatting away as one often does while getting one's hair cut or face shaved. We even have a humorous poem Luther wrote for Peter after one of their conversations about the devil.

Their most influential conversation occurred when Peter the Barber asked Luther "for a simple way to pray that an ordinary man could use."¹ So, Luther wrote a 34 page book entitled *A Simple Way to Pray* and dedicated it to his "good friend."

Now, Peter's story, unfortunately, doesn't end well. Soon after he received this book from Luther, Peter was hanging out with his son-in-law and they apparently got very drunk. When the son-in-law, who was a veteran, bragged that he had survived battle because he was impervious to wounds, Peter stabbed him to test his claim. And the son-in-law died.

Luther and other influential customers of the barber interceded on his behalf. He was spared the death penalty and instead exiled, though he lost everything.

But the book dedicated to Peter, *A Simple Way to Pray* had a lasting influence upon Christian devotion.

The conservative British historian Paul Johnson in his enjoyable book *A History of Christianity* wrote that "Luther evangelized by concentrating on a few comparatively simple messages which he drove home with endless repetition and furious energy." Johnson points out that beginning in 1517 Luther wrote 100 books and many of them sold widely.

One of those topics Luther focused on was prayer. Johnson writes that Luther stressed prayer as "the true alternative to mechanical Christianity." And that Luther's emphasis on prayer was "the most powerful single element of Luther's positive appeal to lay-folk of all classes and well outside Germany."

In the midst of our remembering the transformational teachings of the Reformation, I believe it is important for us to also celebrate how the spiritual and devotional practices of individual Christians changed and what we in the 21st century can learn about our own spirituality.

¹ Introduction to *A Simple Way to Pray* by Gustav K. Wiencke, *Luther's Works: Volume 43*.

Luther had been a monk, of course, and had a robust personal prayer practice—he supposedly prayed three hours a day. But he didn't think this sort of prayer life was required. In fact, he advocated for prayer as part of the household, performed together as a family in the morning and the evening and around the table before meals. This followed from Luther's theological belief that ordinary life was sacred—that work and family and marriage and parenting were holy endeavors that connected you to God.

In his *Short Catechism* he encouraged people to “joyfully go to your work, singing a hymn.” And in *A Simple Way to Pray* he told his barber “It may well be that you may have some tasks which are as good or better than prayer.” He went on to explain how work itself is a form of prayer for the Christian because a Christian is trying to honor God in his work.

In her essay “Martin Luther on Prayer in Life” Mary Jane Haemig discusses how for Luther prayer is “real conversation with God” that “is embedded in the life of every Christian.” As we go about our ordinary lives and our work, we are cooperating with God in shaping the world. She writes, “Luther thought all needs—however mundane, repetitive, and everyday—could and should be brought to God.”

For example, in his explanation of the line from the Lord's Prayer “give us today our daily bread,” Luther wrote:

Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.

All of those are included in that petition from the Lord's Prayer--“give us today our daily bread.” All of those are the sorts of things we should be talking about with God.

And for Luther prayer was not fancy or formal. He encouraged us to express our longing and to do so with “bold and honest talk.” Haemig writes, “Prayer is an opportunity to be honest and authentic about our needs and our lives.”

Luther thought people didn't take enough advantage of the opportunity of prayer, especially when they were in anguish. He thought more people would find consolation and encouragement if they spilled their needs to God, reflected on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, and read the Psalms and scriptures.

Luther's view of prayer was connected to what he believed about God. Haemig writes, “For Luther, prayer reveals what kind of God we have—a God who hears prayer.” A generous, gracious God who loves us and set us free from our sins is a God who wants to listen to us and respond to our concerns. We have a loving relationship with the “power that rules the universe” so why wouldn't we take advantage of that?

These ideas were transformative in people's spiritual lives 500 years ago, popularizing a revolution that forever changed the world. I find these ideas on prayer to be helpful still.

Our connection to the One who created the universe is through the simple, intimate act of praying. Which isn't formal or fancy. It's blunt, honest conversation and includes the ordinary activities of our lives, when those are done for the glory of God.

No one's prayer is more worthy or important to God than anyone else's.

Prayer isn't just talk. Prayer draws us into a cooperative exchange with God as together we shape the world.

And we worship a loving and generous God—a God who hears our prayers and wants to talk with us.

“Prayer is an opportunity to be honest and authentic about our needs and our lives.”

With this encouragement, let us pray.