

July 27, 2025 Message

Catherine Brewer

Sermon “Teach Us to Pray, Lord”

Once again, good morning and welcome! For those of you who may not know me yet, my name is Catherine Brewer; I usually go by “Catie” for short. I accompany Brent Brewer, who is frequently found near the sound board and video equipment. I am mom to almost-8th grader, Alonzo and almost-6th grader, Lillian. On most Sundays, I lead a video discussion Sunday School class for adults. During the week, I am a faculty member in the Department of Chemical & Materials Engineering at NMSU.

This week was yet another week when I had to stand in awe of Jesus as a teacher. In my professional capacity, I spend a great deal of time thinking about what is most important about a particular topic or skill, and then how to make those topics understandable or those skills doable. In my chemical engineering 101 class, students learn to create flow diagrams of chemical processes. They must convert long descriptions of unfamiliar reactions and unit operations into boxes, arrows, and labels that can quickly and clearly be understood. This is a daunting task, yet critical to understanding the equipment, materials, and energy they will study in their future classes. Over 15 weeks, we tackle a different process description every week following a sequence of steps to make it easier. The first step is “find where the blah-blah-blah ends and the actual process description begins”. I did not always teach this step. Experience has taught me that having something specific to search for in a block of text reduces the overwhelming nature of so many words. The second and third steps are similar: find words that represent equipment or actions, find words that represent materials. These words that the students find get added to their papers one at a time and, before the students realize it, they have completed most of the diagram.

In another class, heat and mass transfer, my students drill a sequence of steps for every calculation. Example problems in the book, demonstration problems in class, homework problems, exam problems—all follow the same sequence. The first step is “draw a picture”. The reason that this is the first step is that searching a problem statement for shape and size is usually straightforward. No matter how complicated the problem appears at

first, the students have a task that they can do immediately—a place to start, something to fill the empty page. Once that picture is there, the second step, showing the direction of heat transfer, is easier. From there, the third step, and so on.

Lessons about important things should also be memorable. For example, my students learn that the answer to nearly every engineering question should start with: “it depends”. The repetition of these two words reminds us that a solution must be appropriate for the problem to be solved; one-size-fits-all engineering solutions are rare and sometimes dangerous. Engineers must first consider what depends on what in a scenario. Then, they will know what information they need and what follow-up questions to ask about the scenario in order to find a suitable solution.

One of my favorite teachers in high school was my German teacher, Professor Kreuger. He had been teaching German and theology for multiple decades. Over the years, he had learned where students struggled and had developed ways to help. In German 1, we learned which prepositions take the dative case from the “Danube Datives” (eight prepositions sung to the first line of Strauss’ “Blue Danube Waltz”): aus, ausser, bei, mitt, noch, zeit, von, zu. For prepositions that take a different case depending on the context of the sentence, we had the “Paper Prepositions”: an, auf, hinter, in, neben, uber, unter, vor, und zwischen (all said while moving a piece of paper to the respective relative positions around one’s person). This motion sequence was so helpful for memory that it was not uncommon to see students moving a piece of paper around themselves during quizzes and exams.

Besides having proper grammar, Professor Kreuger wanted us to use our language studies to reinforce our faith. Every day, we would begin class by reciting the Lord’s Prayer in German. At first, this recitation was a repeat-after-me exercise of jumbled sounds. As our language skills grew, we began to pick out the meaning of the words and to internalize the word order, cadence, and intonation of speaking in German. The Lord’s Prayer became our pattern for how German should “sound.” The recitation had a second benefit. With our memorization of the Lord’s Prayer, Professor Kreuger knew that we would be able to participate properly at least once in a church service. No matter how lost we were with the liturgy, sermon, or hymns in German, we could join in when we heard: “Vater unser, der Du bist in Himmel...”

That lesson was not forgotten after I left high school. In college, I studied for a year in Poland. During the first week of my summer Polish language crash course, I asked my teacher to write the Lord's Prayer for me in Polish and phonetically (so that I could imitate the sounds before I knew how to read the words). After a lot of practice, I was very happy when I was otherwise lost in a Catholic Mass or Lutheran Sunday service, then I would hear, "Ojczy nasz, któryś jest w niebie..." and I could join the congregation.

The Lord's Prayer is not very long: six petitions with a doxology added at the end by the early church. In teaching his disciples about prayer (as he did in our reading from Luke), Jesus did three things for them and for us. First, he gave us a pattern to follow, a way to get started when we are not sure what to say. Second, he gave us petitions to help us remember what is important—what we really need, even if we are not thinking about those things at the time. Third, he encouraged us to be bold in our prayers.

In teaching his disciples a pattern for prayer, Jesus made it more likely that his disciples would pray. We all know what it is like to be nervous about something that we have never done before, especially if those actions affect an important relationship or make an impression on others. I remember how nervous I was the first time I hosted Christmas for the extended family and made the traditional Brewer Christmas dinner. I was so nervous, in fact, about not being able to meet expectations that I did a complete practice run the week before. Today, if you invited me to go golfing or skiing, I would probably decline—not because I am not interested in learning to golf or to ski, but because I fear that my floundering will inconvenience the group or make them think less of me.

There would have been pressure on Jesus' disciples about prayer. Religious groups at the time had expectations about how one should pray. Jesus mentioned some of these prayer expectations in Matthew's telling of the Lord's Prayer story, in chapter 6, starting with verse 5:

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they

will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. If I were one of the disciples, I would have been relieved by these words. Most of the time, I'm not prepared to pray in front of others or to pray with lots of fancy language. Such expectations would have pushed me to avoid praying. Now, praying as Jesus recommended...that sounds so much more reasonable. Just like the sequence of steps for diagramming processes or solving heat transfer problems gives my students a place to start, the Lord's Prayer is a ready go-to for when our own words are not coming.

The second benefit of Jesus providing an example prayer is to help us to think about what is important for our well-being and the well-being of those around us. In professional development trainings, you will often hear about the need to differentiate between what is urgent and what is important. Tasks that feel urgent but really could wait, like emails that just arrived, have a sneaky way of filling our time. Similarly, choosing what to pray about can get overwhelmed by things at the top of our minds or things that impact the near future. The petitions in the Lord's Prayer are useful for organizing our thoughts and for paying attention to our spiritual needs.

Several years ago, a friend once asked me to describe one thing that I would change about myself. A few possibilities from past prayers immediately came to mind. Maybe I could make myself a few inches shorter and my feet a little smaller. Then shopping for clothes and shoes could be fun instead of an endless stream of items that were forever slightly too short or too small. Maybe I could rid myself of motion sickness. Then I could read on airplanes or in cars without turning green; I could be the cool mom going on the amusement park rides rather than the one holding people's bags on the nice, stationary ground. Maybe I could cure myself of anxiety. Then I could have more time and energy to enjoy activities with children, travel to new places, and go on outdoor adventures, rather than devoting that time and energy to coping. So many options to choose from, yet I was not convinced that any of those wishes would fulfill what I needed. Such changes would be a relief but I also knew that some new distraction or discomfort was likely to pop up in its place. A breakthrough came when I was reminded of the words from Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 9: But he [the Lord] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." My real wish is to be more comfortable with who I am, to make the most of my talents and my advantages, and to accept my weaknesses for the opportunities

that they create for me to need others and to lean on God. With that new thought, a weight lifted.

The petitions in the Lord's Prayer can lift other weights for us once we can make use of the prompts to spiritual reflection. The petition from the Lord's Prayer that is easiest for most people is "give us this day our daily bread". We have no problem adding details about the things that we need and want. The petition is most useful if we focus on the fact that the petition says "give us" not "give me". By getting us to think about what those around us need, our prayers change as our perspective changes.

The other petitions can do similar things for us as they pull us out of our day-to-day to think about the bigger picture. "Hallowed be thy name" is not something that we would use in a normal conversation. By saying the words, we are pushed to think about God's reputation and what people do (or don't know) about God. We are reminded that other people learn about God through our words and actions as Christians. "Hallowed by the name" becomes a prayer that we send the right messages to those watching and listening, and that the Holy Spirit would help others to know God as we do.

"Thy kingdom come" is an acknowledgement that the world is not as it should be. Jesus' teachings are full of statements about what the kingdom of heaven is like. When we pray "thy kingdom come," we can insert any of those descriptions to capture our longings for peace, justice, and wholeness.

"Thy will be done" is a challenging reminder that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts and his ways higher than our ways. We are asking for God to help us make good decisions. Put another way, we are praying: give us courage to change the things we can change, serenity to accept the things we cannot change, and wisdom to know the difference.

Immediately after the "daily bread" petition to address our physical needs, Jesus directs us to pray for our most critical spiritual need: forgiveness. I grew up with "forgive us our trespasses", which conjured images of crossing into forbidden territory, which I did not find very compelling. I like "forgive us our debts" because that statement makes me recall the parable of the unforgiving servant. The image of a debt as a barrier between people is easy to understand. Praying for forgiveness is a plea to unload our burdens of guilt (our debts) and resentment (the debts of others). Jesus

knows how these burdens build up for us every day. The petition is our regular reminder that, with God's help, we don't have to keep carrying these burdens.

In one of our Sunday school classes, we watched a series on the Lord's Prayer. The speaker suggested that there was punctuation missing when we pray "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil": there should be a comma between the second and third words. First, we pray, "lead us," referring to being guided by God's word and the Holy Spirit. Then, we specifically ask God to help us avoid temptation and to protect us from evil. The speaker's point was that God would not ever lead us into temptation, rather, he provides ways out of temptation. I suggest that we keep the comma, both for the meaning and the extra attention we give the words.

In addition to the pattern and petitions for spiritual insight in the Lord's Prayer, the third thing that Jesus' lesson on prayer gives us is encouragement to be bold in our requests.

In the first line of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus clarified whom we are talking to. We, humans, are to speak directly to God, the ruler of the universe. We use the same form of address that Jesus did, speaking to His heavenly father. To us, who have had this prayer all our lives, this sounds normal. To Jesus' disciples, this was a bold and unnerving instruction.

When I think of audacity in asking, I think of a request I once made of my dad. When I was six, my parents decided that us kids were becoming responsible enough to take care of a pet. My older brother adopted a dog. This gave me the courage to ask a question I'd wanted to add for a long time. I trained my big brown eyes on my father and, with my best smile, asked, "Daddy, can I please have a kitty?" My dad does not like cats. I knew that he did not like cats. His brother had had a very mean cat when they were children; follow-on experiences had not made him any fonder of felines. He knew what getting a kitten for me would entail for him...for a very long time. And he knew how happy I would be to have a cat to sit on my lap when I read, to follow me around the house, to play with me, and to sleep in my bed. As Jesus said in Luke, "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?" Or, if your daughter asks for a kitten and promises to take good care of it...I can still hear his sigh of resignation.

In our Genesis reading, we witness a conversation between Abraham and God as he bravely pleads for the home town of his nephew, Lot. When I was younger, I admired Abraham, expecting that, at any moment, God would lose his patience and Abraham would be smote. I had learned about negotiating with adults and was fairly certain that Abraham had gone too far. Reflecting on the story now, the conversation seems like an odd thing for God to do. God already knew how many righteous people would be (or in this case, would not be) found in the cities. God already had a plan for Lot and his family to escape. Why have Abraham plead his case? Why put Abraham in such a precarious position?

The answer to those questions may come from Jesus himself. When Jesus was teaching his disciples to pray, he did not tell them to back off on their requests. Instead, he had to do the opposite. He had to encourage them to ask and seek and knock. He had to give them an example of a neighbor intruding on a night's rest because that neighbor was not prepared. This suggests that the disciples (and we) do not ask enough; we try to carry on without God. Maybe we do not want to bother God, like the students who avoid coming to me to clarify concepts until the semester is nearly over. Maybe we assume that the answer will be "no" and we don't want to get our hopes up to be disappointed. Maybe we feel we do not deserve God's consideration until we have built up enough "credits" by being good.

The more I think of God's conversation with Abraham, the more I believe that God was training Abraham, forcing Abraham to trust God to hear his requests (and not smite him). Abraham was going to face many challenges in the near future, not least being God asking Abraham to give up his only son, Isaac. Abraham's pleading was not going to change the outcome for Sodom and Gomorra; however, it was going to impact the strength of the relationship between Abraham and God. God was teaching Abraham to pray: to think carefully about what he most wanted and then to boldly take that request to a God powerful enough to act. Abraham knew that the answer could be "no", likely would be "no". When he asked anyway, Abraham received two blessings: the life of his nephew was spared and Abraham had an experience from which to draw courage later.

Jesus wanted his disciples to have the blessings that come with prayer. Therefore, he gave them an example that would help them get the most of

prayer—words that enable focus on spiritual, long-term, and communal needs; words that let the speaker unburden what is weighing on their minds and hearts; and words that open the door for the boldest requests. As we say the words of Lord's Prayer in the liturgy each week and on our own, let us make the most of the blessings that God intends for us. And when we are hesitant to ask, when we fear hearing "no", when we do have any words, let us follow the example of the disciples and simply say, "Lord, teach us to pray," trusting that the Holy Spirit will help us do the rest.

Just as I learned the Lord's Prayer in German, in Polish, and now in Spanish, there is another language in which we can pray: music. For this Sunday, I asked Ms. Beth if some of our musicians could produce for you the Lord's Prayer in song—the way that I hear it in my head when we say the prayer out loud. As you listen, consider words that you might add to each petition to remind you of the meaning of the familiar lyrics. Here are some of mine:

Our father, which art in heaven...

...heavenly father, who loves me, who cares about the content of my life, who puts down what he is doing to turn towards me to listen.

Hallowed be thy name...

...help me remember that I am talking to the king of the universe, the Lord of lords; remind me that your name is who you are to me and to the world

Thy kingdom come...

...the world is not as you created it to be, so much is wrong. Move events and hearts to help make it right. Show me how I can help.

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...

...you have the wisdom and the knowledge. Teach me humility. Help me to put aside my selfishness and rebellion.

Give us this day our daily bread...

...show me that I can rely on you for all that I need. Calm my anxiety so that I can see the needs of the others.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors...

...you know what I am carrying. Help me put it down so I that I walk with you and others.

And lead us...not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...
...the way is not clear and there are many hazards that I am not strong
enough to face on my own. I need your guidance and protection.

I pray these things in the name of your son, Jesus, my savior and teacher.
Amen.

(in German)

Vater unser, der Du bist im Himmel.
Geheiligt werde Dein name.
Dein Reich komme.
Dein Wille geschehe wie im Himmel also auch auf Erden.
Unser täglich Brod gib uns heute.
Und erlaß uns unsere Schuld als wir erlassen unsern Schuldigern.
Und führe uns nicht in Versuchung.
Sondern erlöse uns von dem Uebel
[Denn Dein ist das reich,
und die Kraft
und die Herrlichkeit in Ewigkeit.]
Amen

(in Polish)

Ojcze nasz, któryś jest w niebie,
święć się imię Twoje;
przyjdź królestwo Twoje;
bądź wola Twoja, jako w niebie tak i na ziemi.
Chleba naszego powszedniego daj nam dzisiaj.
I odpuść nam nasze winy, jako i my odpuszczamy naszym winowajcom.
I nie wódź nas na pokuszenie,
ale nas zbaw ode złego.
Amen.

(in Spanish)

Padre nuestro, que estás en los cielos
Santificado sea tu Nombre
Venga tu reino Hágase tu voluntad En la tierra como en el cielo
Danos hoy el pan de este día
y perdona nuestras deudas
como nosotros perdonamos nuestros deudores
y no nos dejes caer en la tentación sino que líbranos del malo. Amen.