

Prayers We Don't Pray
Ash Wednesday- March 5, 2014
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Prayers We Don't Pray Psalm 51: 1-17

The smells of spaghetti, French bread, and corn on the cob filled the kitchen. It was Carol's turn to say grace, "God, help us know when we have eaten enough and stop." She stunned everyone at the table. How cruel does a person have to be to pray something like that? Some things shouldn't be prayed. We know to avoid praying about things we have no intention of changing.

Hunger, for instance, is one of the subjects about which we've learned to be careful. If you pray too seriously for hungry people you'll end up skipping meals and giving your money away. One pastor I know makes a point of not having cash in her wallet on World Hunger Day. She understands that if you're honest with yourself and God about hunger, then you have to give.

That's why most of us are careful not to pray too seriously for the homeless. It's awkward to pray for people who have no home when we have empty guestrooms. A pastor confessed, *"If I don't stop just talking about helping the poor and start doing something to help the poor I'm going to be embarrassed to meet God."* If you pray for poor people, then you have to help.

When our country is at war, we're careful about how we pray. If you're against war, it's hard to pray honestly about the sense of moral superiority that may take up residence in your heart. If you're for war, it's hard to pray honestly about Jesus' compassion for innocent children who are dying.

If we pray too seriously, then God reminds us that there are people whose homes have been destroyed who need help. If we pray about it, we realize that there are things we could do that we haven't done.

We avoid praying about things that we don't want to change. We're careful about praying about the big questions. We know it would be dangerous to pray for orphans who need to be adopted. We're careful about praying about small stuff too. What if you're going to a movie with some friends when a lonely person calls? If you pray about what you should do you might miss the movie.

We're especially careful about praying for people we don't like. Think of the person

whose presence bothers you the most, who gets on your nerves and probably always will. When Jesus said *"Pray for your enemies,"* he was inviting us to the kind of prayer that will lead us to say something kind that we don't want to say.

Most of the time we're afraid to pray about what we could be and do. In so many ways, we choose a life given to comfort over a life given in prayer. It's easier to live by the rules everyone follows and strive for the same version of the good life that everyone wants. We like what we have—including the vices we've gotten used to and the enemies we've carefully chosen.

We don't avoid praying because our prayers go unanswered. We're afraid our prayers will be answered. We try not to see our potential, because we know far more of what we should be doing than we do.

We've learned to pray, *"God, make me a better person, but not so much better that I have to change the way I live."* Prayer is hard because we don't want to start doing what God invites us to do or stop doing what we've gotten used to doing.

King David went a long time without really praying. One afternoon a look turned into lust and David didn't pray about it. The lust turned into manipulation and David acted in ways that he never would have considered if he had the courage to pray. David was able to keep from admitting what he had done or what he needed to do for a long time. He didn't pray, because he didn't want to face the harsh realities.

Psalm 51 is the cry of a person who struggled to find the courage to pray. The amazing thing about this psalm is that for all of its agony, there's also a sense of relief. What David has ignored for so long is finally brought out into the open. It couldn't have been any easier for David to tell the truth about himself than it is for any of us. There is no painless way to stop protecting our easy lives and be honest to God. Yet, David's painfully honest prayer leads to joy.

When you think about the most courageous Christians you know, the ones who make sacrifices for their faith, do you feel sorry for them or is it clear that they have something you should want? People who pray passionately don't have easy lives, but they have abundant lives. God has dreams for us that we've been afraid to imagine.

What would be the result if we prayed for hurting people, the victims of tragedies, and our enemies? What would happen if we made a searching, fearless inventory of how much more we could be if we asked God for the courage to take chances?

Who's to say exactly what would happen, but we might know when we've eaten enough

and stop; take a bag of food to someone who needs it; open our home to someone who needs help; write a check to help refugees; see our enemy with compassion; confess who we are and discover who we are meant to be; end up less comfortable and more saintly.

Ash Wednesday challenges us to pray courageously. When was the last time you prayed about anything that makes you uncomfortable? What will happen if we ask God, "*What should we do?*" Alleluia. Amen.