

It doesn't take a brilliant physicist, or a behavioral specialist, for us to know and understand that as human beings we often rely on our abilities to do some things automatically, without having to think our way through them. Some things - like tying a shoelace, riding a bike, typing on a keyboard, knitting or crocheting a blanket -- are the result of skills we have learned so well that our bodies perform them without fail. Other things -- like brushing our teeth, putting on a seat belt when we get in a car, stopping and looking both ways before crossing the street -- are habits we have developed so fully that we no longer realize we are doing them.

But in other parts of our lives, we don't always want to be on automatic pilot, or don't necessarily want to rely on programmed skills or habits to get us through. In certain situations, or during special circumstances, we need to give our full and undivided attention to someone or something, and of course there are times when we may also demand that same degree of attention from them. Our spouses, our significant others can quickly tell the difference between a programmed declaration of, "I love you," and a heartfelt expression of genuine love. Our kids can tell the difference between an automatic, "What did you do at school today?" and a parent's honest, authentic, and actual interest in the events occurring in their lives. Good friends, best friends, our BFFS can tell the difference between an obligatory, "How are you?" and the compassionate reaching out of one soul to another.

I sometimes wonder if we have somehow, in some way convinced ourselves that God hasn't yet caught on to the difference between our expressions of genuine spirituality and our automatic, routine readings of the "Lord's Prayer." Have you ever recited the "Lord's Prayer" in worship, at a wedding, a funeral, at the end of a church council meeting, with your mind and your spirit on full automatic pilot?

Let's face it, the words are so familiar to us, that there are times when we can practically be on "cruise control" for the entire prayer.

For many people, in too many situations, the "Lord's Prayer" has become little more than a meaningless mantra, or even worse, a kind of "good luck" saying. One Christian recalls this tendency in an amusing story: "I remember reciting the prayer with our High School football team for four years. Every Friday night, right before we'd go out onto the field, the whole team would gather around in one moment of sanity, as together we prayed, "The Lord's Prayer" and ended it with "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen." Then two or three seconds later, we'd all scream, "Let's kill 'em!"

The tragedy of that story, is that it demonstrates how the very prayer Jesus gave his disciples long ago, to keep them spiritually alive and alert, has become routine, mechanical, or even rote for some modern-day disciples. In fact, you might say that today's lectionary texts, from Luke and Colossians, go very well together. They both talk about staying in the fullness and freshness of the Spirit. Jesus promised us that we could stay fresh and alive and plugged into the power of the Spirit. "Ask," he insisted, "and you will receive" -- not just some of us, not just those with special gifts, or those who need it the most, but "everyone!"

In fact, Jesus gave his disciples their own prayer, so that they might live a "wired" life -- being "wired in" to the Spirit. It was about tying them into a relationship with God, the one who had sent his Son to them, so that they might learn from him and through their daily social interactions with him. And by his teachings, they would come to understand what it meant for them to love one another and their heavenly father! Although, I'm not quite sure if "The Lord's Prayer" was ever intended to be a creed, or a catechism, repeated exactly the same

by all Christians at every stage of their lives, I am fairly certain that the "Lord's Prayer" is a kind of template, a blueprint, a beginner's guide, an introductory class on prayer, showing us how we can gain access to the power and love and grace God offers to us daily. Essentially, Jesus says, all we have to do is ask.

Admittedly, there is something compelling and comforting about a meaningful mantra, something we chant over and over again to inspire, encourage, and motivate us. During my sermon prep, as I was thinking about the hymns that were chosen for today, it made me realize there are a number of songs that do this....Jesus Remember Me, when I come into your Kingdom, and Oh Lord hear my prayer, O Lord hear my prayer, when I call answer me, and of course we can also probably think of prayers that are mantra like, or prayers we repeat over and over again throughout our lives. "God is Great, God is Good, let us thank him for our food,"... or what about, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my Soul to keep...Consider the quieting peace that comes from repeatedly reciting the "Kyrie" -- "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy." To stay vitally connected to the Spirit, however, we must expand our understanding of a "mantra" and view it as the repetition of certain practices, attitudes, and relationships, instead of just the recitation of words alone!

A Christian mantra, empowered by the spirit of the "Lord's Prayer," should have at least three components to it to keep it fresh and alive: First it should contain a Daily Scripture Reading. This does not mean books of scholarship about Scripture, or study guides and manuals for investigating Scripture. Rather we need to be willing to learn how to steep ourselves in the Word of God through repeated readings of the Bible.

The men and women of the Old and New Testaments should not be strangers to us. They are our family. We are related to them in the faith. Daily readings

soaked in the stories of our tradition will make for a stronger, fuller, richer faith. We can only remain spiritually "fresh" by conscientiously feeding and watering the roots of our faith. Scripture remains a miraculous gift of God because despite its antiquity, its misuse by the church, its abuse by its doubters, and its overuse by literalists, it still speaks a fresh word from God to us every day that can touch our hearts and make a difference in our lives.

Second of all, daily Prayer should be the second component of a fresh and meaningful Christian mantra. The "Lord's Prayer" was not intended as a "daily prayer." It only points to the fact that "our Father" wants to hear from us every day. Jesus counseled his disciples to be persistent in prayer -- to the point of peskiness.

A favorite Bible commentator of mine named Pastor Brian Stafergen writes, "Prayer is not "putting coins in a vending machine." It is not putting our prayer in the right slot, pushing the right button, and waiting for the vending machine to spit out exactly what we want. God is not a vending machine. God is to be our "Father" "our Abba" "our Daddy". Prayer is a relationship, an intimate, loving, caring parent/child relationship.

I imagine that many of you parents can remember the first time your child uttered the word "da-da" or "ma-ma". It was the start of a new relationship. The child knew who you were and called you by name. What excitement! At that stage, we care for our children, giving them what they need, even before they can ask.

As the child gets older, "Mommy" or "Daddy" may often be followed by "I want." Sometimes we answer, "Yes." Sometimes we answer, "No." But most often as many children can attest the answer is "We'll see." Which begs the question, does our God ever answer prayers with a "We'll see? I like to think so. And what is meant by we'll see? Sometimes it is just a sophisticated way of saying, No. You

don't want to hurt the child's feelings right now, and maybe later he or she will have forgotten the request.

Sometimes, however, it can really mean, "We'll see." Maybe daddy doesn't know right now if he can afford what you want –although that logic wouldn't apply to God. Perhaps dad doesn't know if you are able to correctly handle or understand all the implications about what you are asking for –be it a car, or bicycle, pet dog, motorcycle, or one thousand dollars. Often God's answer of "we'll see" is precisely that.

When we pray for healing. The answer is often, "We'll see." Sometimes our prayers may result in healing, perhaps miraculously, or through human knowledge and skills of doctors, nurses, and medicines. Sometimes the best efforts of the medical team, and our prayers, aren't enough and "well see" becomes a "no." And yet, it isn't necessarily about the answer we receive! Prayer is the presence of God, not that God will always change the situation, but knowing that God is with us, that God is going through the tragedy or suffering or depression, or even death with us, not as a far-off God, way out in space, but as our very close and loving father! Likewise, Jesus encourages his disciples to go continually, and repetitiously, into God's presence in prayer. But God, unlike human parents, delights in our clamoring in prayer all hours of the day and night.

Finally, the last component of a fresh and meaningful mantra is our having a Daily Relationship with Others. Reading the Word and praying to God are faith mantras we must exercise on our own, but we must also read and pray, praise and question together at church, in worship, in women's groups, in men's studies, during church council, and during committee meetings. We need that communal, cellular contact with our faith every day of our lives.

Part of our spiritual freshness depends on opening up our hearts, and our spirits, to the sounds and sights of other Christians. We need to be involved, whether that be hanging out with other Followers of Christ or being actively involved in a small group where members are spiritually connected to one another. It is a good "sign of the times" that prayer chains, continue to be a source of comfort and support for people! Knowing that I have had prayer warriors' praying on my behalf during my divorce with Lyndsay has provided me with a strong sense of peace and comfort.

All Christians struggling to keep their faith fresh, and vital, develop favorite ways, personal mantras, that aid and sustain them. They might employ techniques as ancient and honorable as fasting, or they might involve something as trendy as "Christian aerobics." Perhaps they decide to become a member of a Christian Hiking club, or they join a Disciple's Dine-In or Dine-out group in order to share a meal and be nourished by Christian companionship.

Whatever you are doing to discover a fresh and meaningful mantra to enliven your faith in Christ remember that it should be steeped in scripture, prayer, and communal contact with the body of Christ. Which leads me to end my message today by asking everyone to ponder the following question... Perhaps as you are singing our hymn of the day, or while you are driving home today, you can reflect on it.....And the question, "what are you doing to keep things spiritually fresh in your own walk with God?"