

“Breathing Under Water: Step 7 Why Do We Need to Ask?”
Matthew 6:1-13

We have reached Step 7 on this journey of the spirituality of the 12 Steps with Richard Rohr in his book *Breathing Under Water*. Step 7 is, “Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.” The invitation is to ask God for help. Knowing that we cannot fix ourselves but need help is key to our own transformation. Yet, the difficulty of this step comes from our struggle to humbly ask. Humility is never an easy thing for our egos. We build our whole lives around our ego image of success, power, and independence. We learn from an early age that being independent and doing things on our own is much better than depending on others or asking for help, especially when it comes to our emotional health. I think of the old song, “Hard to Be Humble,” as an exaggeration of what we try to project of ourselves onto the world. The song says that “It’s hard to be humble when you are perfect in every way.” <https://youtu.be/RCyYuLQ7 Ws>

Another challenge for this step is that asking God for help may lead us to believe that we can manipulate God and manufacture our own healing. Two very popular books come to mind when thinking about this. The first book is *The Prayer of Jabez* which cites a prayer recoded 1 Chronicles 4:10, “And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh that Thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that Thine hand might be with me, and that Thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested.” The author promotes saying that prayer every day to get the blessings we want from God. Another book with a similar idea is *The Secret*. It contends that our positive thoughts can manifest whatever we long for. Here is an overview of the movie that the book was based on, <https://youtu.be/san61qTwWsU>.

Both books proclaim a prosperity gospel, where God’s blessings are reduced to getting what we want which is often related to our ego needs for power, possessions, security, and esteem. God knows what we need even before we know it ourselves. To humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings is an invitation to a deeper relationship with God. This is what Jesus was teaching about prayer. He invited people to pray in secret because he knew that the public prayers were being used to inflate people’s egos. In order to appreciate what Jesus was trying to say, we have to take a look at the practice of patronage or beneficence in the ancient Roman and Jewish worlds. A great resource about this is the work of Bruce Winter in his book *Seek the Welfare of the City* (screen image of the book). At the time of Jesus, public works, public buildings, public baths, city festivals, feasts, and games were done by wealthy individuals. So the people of the ancient cities would praise the benefactors in public with great praise that would show their appreciation. Even the emperor of the Roman Empire was part of this practice, giving of his own wealth in order to show off his power and generosity. Benefactors also supported individuals by providing them income and goods. In return, it was the duty of the recipient of such generosity to praise his benefactor in public, writing poems or essays about his generosity or even waking him up in the morning to a hymn of praise.

Against this backdrop, we can appreciate what Jesus was saying to the people. The system that promoted the power and egos of individuals and their social status had no

place in the Kingdom of God. God's way was so different. Let's listen to the scriptures. (Read Matthew 6:1-13).

The invitation is to be humble and vulnerable before God instead of using prayer to inflate our ego and hide from God. It is not about getting things from God. Instead, prayer is about being in a deep relationship with God.

After recognizing our addictions and our need for God to help us, it is important to ask for help. The act of asking is important because it is about inviting God in. Rohr writes (screen), "Prayer is a symbiotic relationship with life and with God, a synergy which creates a result larger than the exchange itself. (That is why Jesus says all prayers are answered, which does not appear to be true according to the evidence!) God knows that we need to pray to keep the symbiotic relationship moving and growing.

Humbly asking God to remove our shortcomings is not about entitlement. When we ask God for help, we place ourselves in the position of a beggar. We are invited to let go of the ego because it often leads us to believe that we are separate from God and from others. The ego tells us that we must earn or deserve love. We live most of our lives trying to prove to ourselves and to others that we are worthy of love. That is why it is essential for us to practice the kind of prayer which Jesus offered, going in secret without much fan fair or the ways of the ego. Praying in secret and humbly asking for God's grace helps us to drop our pretenses and defense mechanisms to welcome the power of God in our lives. It is about the deep recognition of the gift of our own humanity as beloved children of God. The blocks to our full life are not usually the things we think are in the way: jobs, possessions, comfort, perfect relationships, youth, or power. Asking God for help does not guarantee that we will be protected from all harm or that we get our wishes fulfilled. Asking God for help is about the transformation of our own desires because what is often missing in our lives is our inner sense of peace. The shortcomings we ask God to remove from us are usually our coping mechanisms which we developed in childhood when our sense of wholeness was lost or diminished. Think of all the struggles we have today in our world and how our fears and shortcomings play out in daily life and the world stage: broken relationships, personal anxiety, wars, ravaging the earth's resources for the sake of profit, exploitation, and violence. We need God to transform us and our world. We need to reclaim God's vision for the goodness of life. Experiencing God's unconditional love even if it is just for a few minutes a day can be so powerful because it exposes all the falsehoods with which we surround ourselves in order to cope with life. Asking God to remove our shortcomings is about situating ourselves in the flow of love.

Jean Vanier talks about this beautifully in his writing about being fully human. Here is a clip of Vanier speaking about this process of becoming:

<https://youtu.be/XWrru31ZPzo>

(Here is what Vanier said, "To be fully human is really to discover who I am. And who am I? I'm a member of the huge human family, where we're all brothers and sisters wherever we come from, whatever our culture, whatever our religion. We were born in weakness. We will grow. And we will die. So the story of each one of us is a story of accepting that we are fragile.

To discover who I am is also to discover a unity between my head and my heart. The head we are called to grow, to understand, and to work through things. But the heart is something else. It is about concern by others. We are born into a relationship. And that relationship that we all lived is a relationship with our mom. We were so small. So weak. So fragile. And we heard the words which are the most important, and maybe the words we need to hear all our life: I love you as you are. You are my beloved son or my beloved daughter. And this is what gives consistency to people. They know they are loved. And that's what they're seeking, maybe for the rest of their lives.

So there's the head, where we are called to understand and to deepen the laws of the world, of nature, and so on. But there's also the heart. The heart is a very fragile part of us.

And terribly fragile in the little child. If the little child is not loved at the moment of his birth or the few months after there's a deep, deep inner wound. And from that wound comes up anguish, from anguish comes fighting and wanting to win, and to prove that I am someone.

Fundamentally, to develop the heart is to see that in each person you are beautiful. You see, the whole thing with human beings is to learn to love. And to love is not to do things for people. It's not to tell people what to do. It's to reveal. What do we reveal? 'You're important.' You might be important in the things you do. But there's something even more important than what you do. It's who you are. And who you are is something about your heart by being open to others. A heart that is not filled with fear.

The problem today is that many people are filled with fear. They are frightened of people, frightened of losing. And because people are filled with fear they can no longer be open to others. They're protecting themselves, protecting their class, protecting their group, protecting their religion. We're all in a state of protection. To become fully human is to let down the barriers, to open up. And to discover that every person is beautiful. Under all the jobs they're doing, their responsibilities, there is you. And you, at the heart of who you are, you're somebody also crying out, "Does somebody love me not just for what I can do, but for who I am?"

So to be fully human is the development of the heart and the head, and then we can become one. One inside of us. Becoming one inside of us we can little by little let down the ego, the need to prove that I am better than you. And then I can begin to see in other people, other groups, other religions, other cultures, that people are wonderful. And then we can come and we can work for peace together.)

So this invitation to humbly ask for God's help in removing our shortcomings is about trusting that only love is strong enough to heal us. Rohr writes (screen), "God's totally positive and lasting way of removing our shortcomings is to fill up the hole with something much better, more luminous, and more satisfying. Then your old shortcomings are not driven away, or pushed underground, as much as they are exposed and starved for the false program for happiness that they are. Like used scaffolding, our sins fall away from us as unneeded and unhelpful because now a new and better building has been found."

I invite you at this time to take a few moments to allow the Spirit to bring to your attention an area where you are stuck. Bring that as a prayer before God. There is a net in the front which I hope that you can use to tie a piece of yarn on as a symbol of your prayer right after communion. The net will represent the prayer of your heart of whatever is stuck in you to be loosened so that you may experience the freedom of God's grace in your life. We will conclude with the Lord's Prayer based on the Syriac Aramaic by Neil Douglas Klotz in Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus. (screen)

The Prayer to Our Father

"Oh Thou, from whom the breath of life comes,
who fills all realms of sound, light and vibration.
May Your light be experienced in my utmost holiest.

Your Heavenly Domain approaches.

Let Your will come true - in the universe just as on earth.

Give us wisdom (understanding, assistance) for our daily need,
detach the fetters of faults that bind us,

like we let go the guilt of others.

Let us not be lost in superficial things (materialism, common temptations),
but let us be freed from that what keeps us off from our true purpose.

From You comes the all-working will, the lively strength to act,
the song that beautifies all and renews itself from age to age.

Sealed in trust, faith and truth. Amen.