

Reflection for Sunday, July 24, 2022

Luke 11:1-13 – The Lord's Prayer

With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this:

Our Father in heaven,
Reveal who you are.
Set the world right;
Do what's best—
 as above, so below.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.
You're in charge!
You can do anything you want!
You're ablaze in beauty!
Yes. Yes. Yes.

(From the Message, Matthew 6:8-13)

Our Father-Mother, who is in the heavens,
 may your name be made holy,
 may your dominion come,
 may your will be done,
 On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today the bread we need;
 and forgive us our debts,
 as we have forgiven our debtors;
 and do not put us to the test,
 but rescue us from evil.
For yours is the dominion, and the power,
 and the glory forever. Amen.
Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be.
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom
 sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love,
now and for ever. Amen.

I wonder when you first remember saying the Lord's Prayer.

Close your eyes...take a deep breath...remember back to when you first heard the prayer that Jesus taught...where were you? ...how old were you? ...who were you with?

For me, I remember sitting on hard wooden pews beside my family, cozily squished between my parents. We were in the little white church that I grew up in. There was a picture of "Laughing Jesus" on the wall (commissioned by the United Church of Canada in the 1970s by Canadian artist Willis Wheatley). I remember it was the one prayer that everyone knew and the power of the whole congregation raising their voices together.

When I was a little older, for some reason, my church stopped the practice of saying the Lord's Prayer every Sunday. I was blessed to be part of a church that valued and listened to the children in their midst. I was tagging along with my mom to a worship committee meeting, and I simply asked the adults why we stopped. No one seemed to know, so we started up again.

I do not always think that prayers said by rote are the most meaningful, however I have found that having one prayer I know by heart, that is almost ingrained on my soul, as been helpful in times when my own words fail me.

This is a prayer that we know so well that we do not always stop and reflect on what we are saying. Today's gospel reading gives us a chance to do just that.

There are two versions of the Lord's prayer – Matthew 6:9-13 and today's gospel reading, the shorter version in Luke 11:1-4. Luke was writing for the Gentile Christians who did not learn to pray like their Jewish counterparts. The Our Father is a Jewish prayer in its structure and content.

I wonder what part of the Lord's Prayer is resonating with you today. (*pause*)

There are a couple of things that hit me this week when contemplating this familiar prayer was how relational it is, how much it reveals about God and the commitments we make when we say it.

Jesus starts and finishes this teaching on prayer by referring to God as "**Father**." Sometimes the prayer itself is called the "Our Father."

The feminist in me used to get annoyed that God was addressed with male pronouns. Over the years, I have come to accept the intention behind the title, rather than focus on how language has been used to exclude women.

We know that Jesus has referred to God as "Father." Here Jesus teaches his disciples to approach God in the same way. They (and by extension, us) are invited into a personal relationship with God.

Luke's Gentile Christian audience's experience with their fathers likely differed from their Jewish counterparts. The fathers in the Greco-Roman culture enjoyed complete control over their children and grandchildren. Luke introduces the Gentiles to God, who is generous, loving, and attentive to God's children's needs. Luke changes his audience's perspective on fatherhood by presenting God as "the Father who cares for his children and acts redemptively on their behalf" (Joel B Green). The father-child relationship is based on the confidence of the child. This relationship is centered on love, not fear. God the Father is a personal, intimate, sacred, and trusted authority.

Amy-Jill Levine, in her book Sermon on the Mount, reminds us that there are also ethical implications of claiming God as our Father. If we all pray to God as father, then we are all siblings, children of the same parent. It makes us all related; we are family; we are to be faithful to one another as God the Father is faithful to us.

“Your kingdom come.”

Levine also tells us that we should take “kingdom” language seriously. Jesus lived in a kingdom/an empire, without democracy, ruled by an emperor and maintained by an army. Can you hear the political edge in this statement? Can you see why Jesus made the authorities (the people trying to keep the status quo) nervous? We are claiming God’s ultimate authority over any earthly one.

God’s kingdom, the new creation, is marked by universal peace, where all have enough. With Jesus, God’s kingdom has broken into our world. It may not be fully actualized, but we see glimpses of it.

“Daily Bread”

If we go back to Jesus’ Aramaic, there is a future leaning to this bread. Jesus invites his disciples to ask, “Give us tomorrow’s bread today” (Levine). That sounds strange to our ears. Some Jewish texts portray heaven as a glorious banquet: in the world to come, we eat, for this is the time when no one goes hungry. We are talking about Kingdom bread. There is prophetic hope and anticipation in the bread.

“Daily bread” has another reference – manna in the wilderness. The daily bread that God provided this Israelites as they journeyed from slavery to freedom (Exodus 16). Manna was not to be hoarded, it became inedible. Sharing, rather than hoarding, is the mark of a functional community.

The prayer asks for bread, sustenance. It reminds disciples who are in comfortable settings that not everyone gets the daily bread. To love God and love neighbour mandates that hungry bellies be fed.

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

(Aramaic chob or choba can be translated as ‘sin’, ‘debt’ and ‘trespass’).

Diana Butler Bass (Work of the People) tells us that in the ancient Roman empire, debt is not something you choose (like a mortgage might put you in debt today). Debt was about relationship and power, it is about a political and economic system. It was basically a structure of slavery that the Empire was built on. It was foisted on others by people who wanted to retain power. In this system Caesar or Pharaoh is Lord. Debt keeps you enslaved to a false God for the rest of your life.

Jesus is saying “take it down”. When we pray “God’s kingdom come” and “forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors” (the way Jesus taught us), we are really praying to take down systems of oppression and of false obligations to idolatrous gods – we are praying to be free of debt.

Forgiveness restores the balance between humanity and divinity as well as among each other.

“And do not bring us to the time of trial”

When I think of times of trials, I think of Jesus in the wilderness, tempted to use his power and divinity for his own gain. Three times he is tested and each time he replies with a quote from Deuteronomy. Amy Jill Levine says that “Do not bring us to the test” can be summarized: let us not be tempted to use our resources just for ourselves; let us not come to a place where we lord it over others rather than engage in servant leadership; let us not desire the splendors of the world rather than attend to its needs. If such temptations come, and they will, we know we have the resources to resist and to overcome – we have Scripture, the community of faith, the Holy Spirit, and our own conscious.

The Parables

Jesus invites his disciples to be brave in approaching God, who is already close to them. Jesus supports his teaching with two parables: the parable of the insistent friend (11:5-8 - which is not found in Matthew), and the parable of invitation to ask (11:9-13). This parable encourages the disciples to persist, even shameless, in their supplication to God. What motivates a person in need to appeal to his friend at night to give him a loaf of bread is their friendship? The bonds of friendship and the value of hospitality means that we can go to our neighbour in our time of need. However, the bond that connects the disciples with God is more vital than friendship; it is a familial and intimate relationship. This relationship invites the believers to persist in prayer.

The second parable, the invitation to ask, concentrates on the answer to prayer. (This parable is found in Matthew.) Jesus invites his listeners to put themselves in the parent's situation and imagine how to respond to their children's request for food. Jesus continues his teaching on prayer by highlighting the responsibilities of the listeners praying. In challenging times, the disciples need to initiate, ask, search, and knock on the doors asking for help (verse 9). The bottom line is that God the Father will never answer their requests with malice but with love and compassion.

To explain his point further, Jesus gives his audience an example from their interaction with their children. When children ask their parents for food, they do not provide them with a snake or a scorpion to harm them. Instead, parents give their children something to nourish them.

Jesus invites his audience to compare earthly fathers with the heavenly Father, maintaining "that God, whose goodness far exceeds even that of those human fathers who would never answer their children's requests with malice, can likewise be counted on never to give harmful gifts." Jesus stresses the superiority of God's fatherhood.

I have to admit that these parables make me a little nervous. They can leave the impression that if we are just are persistent or shameless enough – if we just keep knocking and asking and seeking – our prayers will be answered. But we have all been in positions where our prayers are met by seeming silence, even when our prayers are not about us.

I do not think that prayer works either because we continue to hound God about something or because we are so shameless in our asking. We are not the key that makes prayer "work." If we keep asking, seeking, and knocking, it is only because God has done so first, and continues to do so. We need to hear this parable in concert with verses 9-13, which make clear that God is good, and that God is eager to give not simply the good things that we might ask for. The closing promise of the Spirit is a shock to any assumptions that we can use prayer to get the material prosperity that our culture idolizes. This is what the petition that "your kingdom come" leads to — a people who receive the Spirit, and are sent out as agents of the coming kingdom. Here, what they receive is not all their wishes (thanks be to God!), or even "good things" (as in Matthew 7:11), but the Spirit of the kingdom.

Sources:

www.workingpreacher.org
<https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/>
Feasting on the Word commentary
Sermon on the Mount, Amy-Jill Levine
<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/>

Dearly Beloved, Grace and Peace to you.

*Ask, and it will be given to you;
search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you.*

*For everyone who asks receives,
and everyone who searches finds,
and for everyone who knocks,
the door will be opened.*

—Luke 11.9-10

Faith is not having; it is searching.

Faith is not knowing; it is asking.

Faith is not having arrived;
it is knocking on the door.

See how often the Teacher praises people's faith
knowing nothing of their beliefs or their attitudes,
only that they are reaching out.

Faith is reaching out.

Certainty does not draw us near to God.

The lived question does, the open hand,
opening ourselves to what flows new each moment.

We are leaves turning toward the sun, lovers longing for our lovers, children calling for mommy,
swimmers coming up for breath.

Trusting the Beloved's generosity, deepen your pleading.

Let everything you do, every moment, be an opening, a breathing in,
an ardent search, a reaching out to God.

Look! The door is opening.

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