

2013 July 28
Luke 11.1-13
"Some Prayer Pointers"

A particular cowboy was trying to buy a health insurance policy. The insurance agent was going down the list of standard questions. "Ever have an accident?" "Nope, nary a one." "None? You've never had any accidents." "Nope. Ain't never had one. Never." "Well, you said on this form you were bit by a snake once. Wouldn't you consider that an accident?" "Heck, no. That dang varmint bit me on purpose."

Jesus tells his friends that if they, being the flawed and sinful creatures they are, know enough to give their children a fish when asked for one, rather than a snake, how much more will their heavenly Father care for them? The snake, the fish, the egg, the scorpion are used as tangible props in Jesus' explanation of prayer.

At the beginning of today's reading we find Jesus at prayer, alone. Luke paints a picture of a praying Jesus. In chapter three we find him praying following his baptism, when the heavens are suddenly opened and the Holy Spirit descends on him. In chapter 5 Luke reports that Jesus would retire to desolate places and pray, especially when he became renowned and people would seek him out. In chapter 6 Jesus spends all night in prayer before selecting the twelve who would become his closest disciples. In chapter 9 we find him praying before he asks his disciples, who the crowds say he is, and then who they say he is. In the same chapter he prays on the mountain before he becomes transfigured in the presence of three of his disciples, and before he converses with Moses and Elijah. He prays on the Mount of Olives before he is arrested. And of, course, we even find Jesus praying in chapter 23 as he hangs on the cross.

The gospel record, including Luke, indicates that Jesus spent a great deal of time in prayer.

After Jesus finishes his prayers in today's reading, one of the disciples asks him to teach him and the others how to pray. Jesus replies, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

If you are reading the King James Version of this passage you will find some significant differences with what is printed in the New Revised Standard Version and other more modern versions. The most reliable Greek manuscripts have this briefer version of the Lord's Prayer in Luke chapter 11. I will be working with the text as we find it in these more modern versions, but if you have the King James Version, that's most certainly OK.

It is worth noting that when an unnamed disciple asks Jesus to teach him and the others how to pray, Jesus doesn't offer a list of techniques or practices. Instead, he gives his disciples a prayer. This response is very different from what you will find in most modern books on prayer. They tend to offer ways of praying, practices that are intended to yield a rich and intimate prayer life. There is nothing wrong with that kind of response, but Jesus offers something different. He gives his friends a prayer.

In fact the prayer that Jesus gives them can be considered a kind of summary of what he considers to be important in the life of one who seeks to be faithful to God. In other words, the prayer as we have it recorded in Luke chapter 11 is a kind of creed, a statement of faith, as well as a prayer.

Luke's version of the prayer has two primary parts. The first part is an exclamation of praise: Father, holy is your name. May your kingdom come.

Note how in one statement Jesus ascribes to the living God the two distinctive characteristics that we find throughout both the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, the Old and New Testaments. God is both all powerful, commanding the elements, the LORD of all the earth, that is, God is "in heaven." At the same time, God is Father, that is, God loves us as children, caring and watching over us as a protective parent would do. In the language of theologians, God is both transcendent and immanent. Jesus wants his disciples to remember that each time they pray.

The next statement is a prayer for the coming of the Father's kingdom. Your kingdom come. Remember that our understanding of the kingdom of God is that it is already here, in part, just not yet fully complete. It is already, but not yet. Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for the completion, the perfection of that kingdom. We understand that that completion and perfection will happen when Christ returns. Then, finally, every tear will be wiped away. There will be no more pain or sorrow. We will live in intimate relationship with God and with each other, in a way that we can only begin to imagine. That's what we pray for when we pray "Your kingdom come."

Then begins the second major part of the prayer. In the second part we pray for ourselves, and not ourselves as in "me" but ourselves as in "us." The second part is emphatically framed in terms of the community, not the individual. Give us our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive those who are indebted to us. Do not bring us to the time of trial. The second part of Luke's version is a prayer for the community. Something to be learned there, of course, whenever we ourselves pray.

The first thing we ask in the second section, is for our daily bread. Almost everyone is agreed that bread means bread, but it also means all that we need for sustenance and in order to thrive. It means food. It means communion with other people. It means God's presence. And we ask to receive all of these things, sufficient for today.

Many scholars think there is an implicit reference here to the daily bread, the manna, that the children of Israel received over those 40 years when they lived in the desert, waiting for the time when they could enter the land that God had promised to them. As recorded in Exodus, the LORD provided just enough manna each morning so that the Israelites would have food for that day. Not too much, not too little. If the Israelites tried to store up some of the manna for the next day, it rotted and became inedible. Only enough for the day.

Jesus taught his disciples, and teaches us, to pray only for that which we need today. He has the same lesson in Matthew chapter 6. Don't worry about tomorrow. How hard is that?! Really hard. I am among the worst. But Jesus and his disciples apparently lived day to day, counting on the charity of the people they encountered to provide for them. We have something to learn here. Especially me.

Then comes a sentence about forgiving. In the New Revised Standard Version, Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. Luke actually uses two different Greek words, one which is almost always translated as sin, and the second which almost always bears connotations of owing something to someone. Elsewhere in the NRSV it is translated as owe, debt, bound, ought, need, should, must. In Matthew's version of the prayer the same word is used in both places, our debts and the debts of others. Luke wants us to know that we are

talking about sin, so that is the word Jesus uses in his version: Forgive us our sins, as we forgive the sins of others.

So now you know why we odd Presbyterians use the words debt and debtors. Those words are actually closer to the most common English translations of the Greek words used, in both Matthew and in Luke. The translators of the King James Version, published in 1611, chose to use the words “trespasses” and “those who trespass against us.” The traditional Presbyterian version of the prayer is intended to remind us that we are in debt to the living God. We owe the Lord a debt that we can never repay, in light of our inability somehow pay for our sin. But, all praise to God, we are forgiven. We understand that that forgiveness is ours, not because we have somehow earned it, but because Christ has taken on himself the due punishment for our sin. A free gift of grace.

So what? So we are to forgive others their debts to us. In fact, the prayer says not that we intend to do that, or that we will one day do that, or that doing so is our high and lofty goal. The text says that we do that, now. We forgive others their debts to us, their injuries to us, right now. We don’t intend to do it. We do it.

The final sentence, the end of the prayer, is “Do not bring us to the time of trial.” In the traditional version, “Lead us not into temptation.” Matthew adds “but deliver us from evil.” Many New Testament scholars believe that the intention of both Luke and Matthew here is yes, protection from the daily temptations to sin, but also the daily temptations to renounce our faith, or to fail to live up to the calling we have received in Christ. Many of these same scholars also think that there is a distinct reference to the coming judgment and restoration as well, that we pray to be protected from trial when the tribulations of the end times are upon us.

That’s the end of the prayer. Then Jesus offers a commentary. Part of that commentary is the parable of the persistent neighbor. Suppose that suddenly an unexpected friend arrives at your door at midnight and you have nothing to feed him. The implicit hospitality code of the middle east requires that you feed this unexpected guest, so you go to your neighbors house and knock on his door and ask for bread to serve your guest. But your neighbor is already in bed, his door is locked, and he at first refuses to get up. Jesus says, continue knocking, and surely your neighbor will finally get up and do what you ask.

Thus, we are to be persistent in our prayer. Some scholars think a better translation of the Greek word used here is brazen or shameless. Ask brazenly, shamelessly, for the things in the prayer Jesus has just shared with his disciples, and surely God will answer. But note carefully that context is everything. We are to pray the Lord’s Prayer brazenly and without shame. Note that there is no “please” in the second part of the prayer. Give us, forgive us, do not bring us. The word “please” is not there.

Then Jesus says to his friends, Ask and it will be given, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened. Everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will find the door opened. Parents know to give their children fish, not snakes, and eggs, not scorpions. If you who are evil know to do these things, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!

Remember, context is everything. Asking for a new Cadillac will not necessarily get you a Cadillac. Asking for healing of a loved one will sometimes result in physical healing, but not always. We can’t always get what we want, or what we pray for. Prayer is more complicated than that. It is certainly OK to pray for what we need, but remember that this commentary

follows the Lord's Prayer. Ask for the Father's kingdom to come. Ask for daily bread. Ask for forgiveness of sins. Ask for protection from the time of trial. These are the kinds of prayers God will always hear and respond to. In the way of emphasis, yes: we should pray for our own needs, for our families, and so on. But here, in the eleventh chapter of Luke, when Jesus promises that we will receive, we will find, we will have the door opened, he is talking about the petitions in the Lord's Prayer.

So yes: Pray the Lord's Prayer. Do so shamelessly, brazenly. And watch what the living God will do. And watch especially for the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is also promised to us when we pray. There must be something really special about that Holy Spirit.