

THE LORD'S PRAYER – OUR MODEL

July 25, 2010 – Proper 12, Year C

Grace Church, Haddonfield, NJ - Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

We are a people of prayer. It is part of our lives in many places. Take a look around us. There's the votive candle rack where we light a candle and say a prayer. Consider our long prayer list we say each Sunday. People write in to the Church or call to have people's names added to our list and we read it every Sunday. Pick up the red book in the pew racks, the one with the gold cross. It's our book of .. Common prayer. Prayer is part of our lives, part of our faith.

But how do we approach prayer? Some of us have our daily prayers. Others turn to prayer most often in crisis. I remember the prayer service we held September 11th here ... there wasn't enough room for everyone. When someone says to us there is an issue or problem in his or her lives, we often respond, "I'll pray for you." When I visit people in the hospital or the home bound, I start our praying together by asking, "What would you like to pray for?" It becomes a revealing time. I also marvel at the people so sick, semi-comatose that says nothing until I start the Lord's Prayer ... and they join in with me!

Despite all these practices, one of the most often questions I get from people is, "How do I get a prayer life?" It's a curious question given all the ways we gather for prayer right now. People want to know if there is something they should do. Others talk about all the distractions that keep them from regular times of prayer ... worries, life, busy schedules, work, and kids. But when that question is asked, I wonder ... what do we really want? Are we looking for a quick fix? Are we questioning are faith?

What we have today is the model for Christians ... the Lord's Prayer. Our prayers are based on this offering of Jesus. It's well worth our time to look at this very familiar prayer and understand what we are saying. It appears in two Gospels, Matthew (6:9-13) and today in Luke (11:1-13). Some parts of our familiar prayer, such as the ending, which we call the doxology, ... come from later sources. Both versions are based on traditional Jewish forms. Luke presents us with three things to reflect upon today: the Lord's Prayer, a parable (or story) about persistence; and, a promise. So today we'll unpack the Lord's Prayer to gather deeper meaning of it.

Notice where we find Jesus today. He's alone .. praying. It was part of Jesus' common life. But one of the disciples asks the question that I referred to earlier. He says, teach us." What was the disciple looking for? He already was accustomed to praying daily, in the local synagogue and at the Temple. I think he is looking for something more, for a deeper relationship with God. I think that's what we are looking for as well.

Notice this time Jesus gives the disciple a direct answer! He starts off offering a prayer. It has the first two parts directed to God and then three petitions. It's different from the prayer we most often recite. There also are some parts "missing" that we find in the more familiar Matthew version. But here Jesus teaches us!

He starts by saying, pray this way ... "Father." Now we have to stop here a moment. Right away there is something different. It's not evident to us but the word that Jesus uses is the Aramaic "abba." No, this is not the Swedish rock group from the 70s. Abba can more closely be translated to our word "daddy." We see at once that Jesus speaks from a deep, personal relationship. There is a familiarity with God, more of a child and parent relationship. This would have shaken many of the disciples. They had been taught that the name of God was sacred. Most of them would not have used the name "Yahweh" for fear of offending God. To be on the safe side, they usually used,

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“adonia” which meant, “my lord.” What Jesus reveals is his own divinity, his own deep relationship with god into which we are drawn with the first world. God is a loving parent as Jesus addresses the Holy.

Now come the first two petitions and notice that they are directed not towards needs but first towards God. This is a common understanding in Jesus’ time. It’s also the way we’ve design our prayers. Jesus says, “hallowed be your name.” Sacred is God’s name, holy. It is a prayer of adoration. When I was younger, in our teaching on prayer we were instructed in ACTS ... prayers were to be of (A)doration; (C)onfession; (T)hanksgiving; and (S)upplication (another word for petitions). Right away Jesus centers us in God, and points to the Holy first. We do the same. We start our prayers: Almighty God; Everlasting Father; Heavenly God; Omnipotent One ... and so on. What comes first in prayer is adoration of God.

The next petition Jesus offers is “your kingdom come.” Here Jesus puts up hope and expectation for the coming of God’s reign on earth. He recognizes first the centering in God and next the desire for God’s coming among us. The Lord’s Prayer opens up for us the possibility of God’s coming into our lives as well as looking to the future.

Now we come to the petitions. I want to also mention that the prayer is designed for communal petition. Notice the use of the word “us.” It’s not “me” or “I” ... it is us ... the praying community. The Lord’s Prayer reminds us that we are not just individuals but part of a faith community. Now the petition, Jesus says, “give us this day our daily bread.” Give us enough to sustain us for today. Deal with the present. Jesus does not add to the prayer give us today and for tomorrow. Give us enough for today.

We don’t know what it is like to go hungry. Our refrigerators and cupboards are usually full, unless our teenage sons come home and open them. But in Jesus’ day, one of the major concerns was to have enough food, just for today. In our world now, half of the people go to bed hungry. What we see in this first petition is just enough for today ... not for today and tomorrow, but just for today to sustain us. Maybe what we need to read into this prayer is enough daily “bread” to fill our souls, our lives. Whatever is the need, we are to ask for enough for today to sustain us.

The next petition asks for forgiveness of our sins. Whoa! There’s that word ... sin. We Episcopalians are uncomfortable with it. We like the Matthew version better ... debts. Debts we understand ... they have to do with mortgages, credit cards, car loans and student loans. The word sin makes us squirm in our seats. But at the heart of Jesus’ teaching and proclamation is the issue of forgiveness. Jesus died for our sins on the cross. We are a forgiven people. This is a central truth for Christianity that Christ came into to the world to save sinners (that’s us folks). The word used here is harmatia ... and it means the broken relationship with God (and others). What we are asking to be restored is that relationship with God.

But as we look at this petition, there is a catch! Not only do we ask for our forgiveness ... but also we are to forgive others! The debts that others owe us are to be forgiven! This is a two for one petition. It has a request and a demand. So often it is tough for us to forgive ... but it is expected if we want to be forgiven. For Jesus’ audience, this would also call up the ideas of jubilee ...a time in the life of Israel when all debts were forgiven! Think about the nature of life if all our debts were erased! Now we have a sense of what is being asked of us.

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The last petition Jesus asks that we not be brought to the time of trial. Matthew uses “temptation” in his version. What is requested is that we not have to face the trials, the woes, and the struggles of this life. But the reality is that our world is full of these things. We can still ask, but they will still come. We may like Matthew’s version more here because it says save us! A truth that will become evident later is that in the midst of our trials, God is still there (but that’s another sermon for another time).

There they are. The petitions. The model of prayer is given to us. What follows not is a parable that reveals something to us about the nature of prayer ... to keep on praying ... to be persistence! Jesus shares this parable of a friend in need. He comes to his neighbor’s door. It’s late. Acme has closed and so has the local convenience store. Company has arrived and they are hungry. The friend was not planning to go shopping until the next day. He needs food. But we are asleep, the kids are in bed ... and we resist getting up. But the persistence of the friend, the recalling of the relationship, wakens us and we respond to the friend’s need. What Jesus says here is if we will respond to a friend’s persistence ... won’t God respond to us and our prayers? Of course God will. The parable here calls us to keep up the praying ... to be persistent.

What follows next is familiar to us (and also found in Matthew): ask and be given, search and find, knock and be opened. This is the promise part of our lesson this morning. But it also a part that has troubled me for years. I ask for lots of things and don’t get them. Is Jesus says to ask in our prayers, but is this the blanket request of everything that we want? Our reality tells us differently. We ask for the winning lottery numbers, and don’t get them. We ask for healing, but it doesn’t come. We ask for ... well, you know. We ask and don’t get. One of the issues is that we have to stop looking at God as Santa Claus, who we present with a list of everything we “want” and expect to find it in our stockings or under the tree in the morning.

Perhaps we need to look at our way of asking. Maybe we have to ask for what we “need” rather than what we want. Many of us have searched without finding, but then unexpected discoveries seem to come to us. There’s the old saying that when one door is closed, another is opened. Maybe that’s the hand of God at work. But what is Jesus saying about ask, search and knock? He clarifies this promise with talk about gifts for children.

What parent would give a child a snake when they ask for a fish? Rather strange sounding, eh? But remember the time and area of Jesus’ life. Fisherman often caught water snakes in their nets with the fish. No parent in his or her right mind would give a snake to a child instead of a fish. Who would give their child a scorpion instead of an egg? Again, in Jesus’ time and place, scorpions were known to roll up into balls that looked a little like eggs when they were threatened. Still, no parent would give this dangerous thing to a child.

Jesus goes on to say, you who are evil (wow! What a way to describe us!) Who know to give good gifts to our children ... won’t God (our loving parent) give us even better gifts? It’s then that Jesus speaks of this promised gift ... the Holy Spirit. Somehow our asking, searching and knocking has to be directed towards the gift that God would give us ... the Holy Spirit.

So there it is. We have “unpacked” the Lord’s Prayer this morning. Did you ever imagine there is so much here in this very familiar prayer? We would do well to reflect upon these words that Jesus

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has given us. Let's not just race through them and speak them without thinking about them. The Lord's Prayer is our model. It tells us something about God, about Jesus and ourselves. Let these words resonate with the soul!