

Teach Us To Pray

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11:1-13

My sister still owns the house in Boston where I grew up. My niece currently is in residence. She is the fifth generation to live there. That's a long time and a lot of memories. It has been awhile since I last visited this family historic spot. With each visit, the house has gotten smaller and grown a bit more worn. Even so, as I go in the door, memories burst forth. I see my great grandmother sitting in her rocker, looking out the window. I hear us racing down the stairs on Christmas morning to see what Santa brought. And I hear my mother's voice coming out of the dark as I try to quietly sneak in the door. "Do you know what time it is, young lady? You are grounded. Permanently."

This morning we are reflecting on a topic that has been presented more times than any of us can count. Bob has used it. I have used it. Is there yet more to uncover in a sermon on the Lord's Prayer? Probably not; but, consider it as a visit to a familiar and beloved location. Tune out, if you like, and let the memories flow. Do you recall when you first learned the Lord's Prayer? I know that I cannot. It has simply always been a part of me. It must have begun somewhere so long ago that I absorbed it into my consciousness. But it did begin as this story illustrates in a more contemporary setting:

A mother was teaching her three-year-old the Lord's prayer. For several evenings at bedtime she repeated it after her mother. One night she said she was ready to solo. The mother listened with pride as she carefully enunciated each word, right up to the end of the prayer. "Lead us not into temptation," she prayed, "but deliver us some E-mail, Amen." My prayer might be 'Deliver us from the spam.'

When we do the monthly Communion Services at the Nursing Homes, some of the residents may sing all the words to old familiar hymns and some of them may fall asleep during most of the Service but when we begin the Lord's Prayer, it is as though a light is turned on in their minds. Eyes are a bit brighter, bodies a bit straighter and faces a bit happier as we say the old familiar words together. Each month, doors are opened in the souls of those residents as a memory so strong that it cannot be erased in worn out minds, is invoked. If we do nothing else during those times but say the Lord's Prayer, it is enough.

Yet even as I speak these words, I recognize that not all people here are familiar with our form of Reformed worship. What I take for granted, is a new and undiscovered land for many. Our prayers, our hymns, our liturgical expression are something akin to a foreign language for those who have never been in any kind of church and for those whose religious background is quite different. A number of years ago, we were vacationing at a lake in Maine. My very Roman Catholic sister and her family were with us. On Sunday, My husband and I decided to bring our children to the Service at a local UCC church. My sister and her family came along, probably expecting to be struck by lightning. Used to the big Gothic Catholic Church in New Jersey where she lived, my niece was awe struck at the plain Congregational style of the Maine church. "Wow," she exclaimed, "This looks like Little House On the Prairie." Obviously, this Sanctuary is not a plain Congregational Church but it is or can be intimidating to visitors. That is one reason why we print the Lord's Prayer in each Sunday's Order of Worship. Perhaps in those familiar words, some sense of comfort may lessen the newness.

So what may be a trip down memory lane for many, may be an introduction to others. This morning in the scripture reading, most of you may have been surprised to hear a different Lord's Prayer than you were expecting. I would guess that for all of us, the Luke version of the Lord's Prayer is not only a surprise but also a bit of a challenge. Luke presents us with what seems to be a shorthand rendition of Matthew's familiar and longer version. Scholars are unclear as to which version came first, but most would agree that Matthew expanded the core message of the prayer. No matter which version it is, at the heart of the prayer is an echo of our human yearning for assurance that God is not only the distant Almighty Creator of the universe, but also, our loving parent who listens and responds to our pleas for aid in all our situations.

I often talk to books or argue with books. Fortunately for me they have not yet begun to talk back. So I share with you what puzzles me about the introduction to the chapter. One of the disciples asks Jesus to teach them how to pray. Observant Jews from before the time of Christ until now, are expected to pray three times each day. Why, then, would his disciples ask for a lesson on prayer? We eat three times a day. Wouldn't it be odd to ask Chef Emiril to teach us how to chew. I pondered that request from the disciples and my own answer lies in heart versus rote. As the request to the Chef might be, 'teach us how to savor what we chew,' so the request from the disciples might be understood as, 'teach us how to use the words and thoughts of our prayers to savor the reality of God's presence in our lives.'

Jesus responds with an invitation to familial intimacy. "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name. Father can also be translated as Dad or Daddy.

With the opening words of the prayer we understand that God is first our beloved parent

but also the Holy One whose name is sacred beyond words. Our daddy who loves us beyond our ability to understand is holiness personified. Thus God is closer than the air we breathe and infinitely beyond our human ability to grasp.

Your kingdom come. In every age since those words were first uttered nearly 2000 years ago, that plea continues to articulate the inability of humans to bring into being a world in harmony: among the community of nations, between individuals and between humanity and the rest of creation. We just haven't been able to create the harmonious balance that we so desperately desire, so we say, 'Your kingdom come;' Your kingdom where with Isaiah we envision a place where the wolf lies down with the lamb and a little child shall lead them and the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord. [Isaiah 11:6ff] Don't let us stand in the way of your kingdom. Bring it on.

Give us each day our daily bread. This sentence can also be translated, Give us what is necessary for each day. Maybe as we ask, we also realize that what we need is enough nourishment to sustain us through the day; nourishment that is more than bread. For all of us there are moments when what we need is enough courage to face a time of adversity or enough strength in a time of pain or weakness. Perhaps what we might need is sufficient patience to carry us through a time of stress and anger. Or, what we need is sufficient wisdom or insight to resolve a difficult situation or to make a difficult decision. So we pray, Daddy, give us each day what we need to be faithful.

Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. Good and loving parent that our Divine Daddy is, we know that we are forgiven even as we ask for that forgiveness. One of those memories from my childhood home comes unbidden to my mind. I was in the back yard with my younger sister, swinging up high on the swing

set and jumping off. My sister copied me, jumped off and got hit in the head by the wooden seat of the swing. My father saw what happened, yelled at me and I ran in the house in tears of anger, guilt and fear, with good reason. I was afraid for my sister and my father was not one to spare the rod. That day he surprised me. He came over, sat down beside me and said in a quiet and gentle voice that my sister was fine and he wanted me to know that because I was the oldest, I had to be the one he could count on to take care of my younger sisters. What I did was pretty stupid, he said, but he knew that I didn't mean to get my sister hurt and would be very careful in the future. And he gave me a big hug. All the fear, guilt and anger were gone. I don't believe I ever felt as much love from my father as that afternoon. And I took his words to heart.

Each Sunday we listen to the words of assurance following the time of confession. What we don't often say is that we have a divine responsibility to forgive as we have been forgiven. To be true children of our divine Dad, we have no choice but to forgive all the hurts, slights, pain or disappointment that others have caused. As we are forgiven, so we also forgive. It is an expectation within the family.

And do not bring us to the time of trial. This request is the most difficult to understand as it is stated. I seek other interpretations of those words. Eugene Peterson who has written a contemporary paraphrase of the Bible uses these words: "Keep us safe from ourselves..." I like those words. So we can pray, Guide us with your loving wisdom away from cruelty, selfishness, arrogance or pride. Protect us from our worst motives; those that not only cause hurt but also brokenness in relations. Keep loving us as we learn to love ourselves and equally, all others. Daddy God, we are only infants. Nourish and care for us as we grow that we may be all that you desire for us.

You may remember the Cotton Patch New Testament written by Clarence Jordan, the founder of Koinonia Farms in Georgia. Jordan was a Good Old Boy but also a Master of Theology and a Ph.D. in New Testament Greek. He took the writings of the New Testament and translated them into the storytelling style of the rural South. This is his translation of Luke's Our Father:

“Father, may your name be taken seriously.
May your movement spread.
Sustaining bread grant us each day.
And free us from our sins, even as we release everyone indebted to us.
And don't let us get all tangled up.” [Cotton Patch Luke and Acts, p. 48]
'Teach us how to pray,' the disciples asked. We can use words that we have

known from childhood. We can also talk to God in words that come from our hearts. Or we can sit in silence, listening beyond the silence to the truth of God's love and care, trusting that we are heard. Knowing that our Abba, our Daddy will always be there for us, undoing the tangles. Amen.