

A Prayer that Jesus, At Least, Thinks We Should Pray

Matthew 6:7-15; Luke 11:1-4

When's the last time your faith was ennobled or challenged or quickened or deepened by praying the Lord's Prayer? When's the last time you thought about what it might mean. For instance . . .

If your grandchild or child were to ask you, "What does 'Hallowed' mean," what would you answer? And a hallowed name. . . what's so great about that? And do you have an opinion about the wording of the Lord's Prayer: should it be forgive trespasses or sins or debts?

By the way, all three are acceptable in Matthew, we hear "debts" in the prayer, "trespasses right after," and in Luke, we hear both "sins" and "debts."

And even the way we pray the prayer: Does our phrasing tend to mask its meaning? Thy kingdom come. Stop. Thy will be done. Stop. On earth as it is in heaven. Which now just sort of sits there by itself. The prayer begs to be prayed, "*May thy kingdom come and thy will be done here on earth, as it is in heaven.*"

All this not to disparage the Lord's Prayer, but rather for us to stop, to take it seriously. To hear again its context and its meaning. To savor again what it is Jesus is trying to say to us in this prayer. Oh, and by the way, let's be careful never to invite a congregation or a gathering ever to *say* the Lord's Prayer, for then it is an empty ritual. . . no may we always invite one another to PRAY the Lord's Prayer.

Because when we truly pray the Lord's prayer it challenges us to our very core.

Now, in Luke, the Lord's Prayer, in shortened form, appears after the two stories we tracked the previous two weeks: the Parable of the Samaritan who helps a helpless beaten man and proves himself to be his neighbor and the story of Mary and Martha, in which a woman, Mary,

is commended for acting like a disciple by sitting at the feet of Jesus. In both situations, cultural expectations have been turned upside down . . . which means that the Kingdom of heaven, the Kingdom Jesus has in mind, is something different than what most people are expecting.

The Kingdom of heaven will have different core values if you will than the values by which the current religious and imperial authorities were living. In kingdom Jesus proclaims, the cast aside become central, compassion is exalted at the center of things. And there is an intimacy of relationship between God and humanity in Luke. Instead of “Our father which art in heaven,” we have the simple, intimate word, “Father.” As if God is an entity known not just in heaven, but with us, within us, among us.

And by the way, in the coming kingdom, the concept of “US” will be as important as the concept of “me.” It’s community. It is not, give ME this day, MY daily bread. . . but us. The Lord’s Prayer leads us away from a selfish focus on our own spiritual journey and leads us towards living in relationship with community.

Matthew sets the Lord’s Prayer in a different context. Oh, and by the way, there should be no consternation or conflict here. We can well assume Jesus used his model prayer many times in many places and would have felt free to change the wording here and there according to the needs of his congregation. After all, the Lord’s Prayer’s power is not in the exact wording, but in the spirit behind the words.

The context in Matthew is the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus is imploring us to take seriously God’s relationship with us, to live authentically in God’s grace and under God’s direction. And again, God’s Kingdom values are different from earth or political kingdom values.

In both Luke and Matthew, Jesus reminds us that prayer is not so much about phrasing and content, as it is about heart. In prayer, we open ourselves again to God. We make space in our lives for him to enter in. And so in Luke, the disciples want a handy-dandy prayer phrase book,

one like John the Baptist gave his followers, which makes Jesus' simple phrases somewhat of a disappointment to Jesus' disciples, I would imagine. Jesus is not offering the disciples a ritual or a liturgy, but an invitation to open their hearts to God when they pray.

And in Matthew, Jesus says, in prayer, don't shoot for beauty, for art. Those wonderful, beautiful, artful phrases, well, God has heard it all before. And God already knows what you need, anyway.

At which point we ask Jesus, "Well, if God already knows what we need, then why do we have to pray?" An answer might be, "*So that we can come to learn what we need.*" What we need, so as to live in dynamic relationship with God, to be able to receive the gifts that really matter.

The gist of what we call the Lord's Prayer is the version found in Matthew. And as we pray it, may we not become overwhelmed with its undeniable poetry, beauty, structure. May we instead be mesmerized by its meaning and transformed by its truth. Because that's what Jesus means to happen.

So, how about it? What is Jesus hope, what is Jesus intent, as he gives us this prayer?

First, Jesus describes God. As father. That's an intimate relationship of love and of guidance. So, this God of heaven is also God of earth. And hallowed is his name. Hallowed. Holy. Saintly, if you will, is his name. Back then, one's name was an insight into one's character. To invoke the name of God is to invoke the character of God. And God always acts according to his character. God is not a capricious God who must be placated. God is wholly righteous, merciful. The fullness of God's character, by the way, is made known to us in Jesus Christ.

Daily bread. The prayer, in asking for daily sustenance, also affirms that God already does sustain us. Daily bread calls to mind the daily bread the folks receive from God on their wilderness journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. It is a reminder to us that God has been loving his people for a long time, and is not about to quit now.

And the prayer is for God's kingdom to come upon earth. Now, there are different ways of describing what God's kingdom on earth will look at, some violent, but others not so. When Jesus says the Kingdom of God is a hand, he is saying it is breaking through.

And among the people of God and in the ministry of Jesus, we begin to catch a glimpse of what this kingdom is like.

For one thing, in this kingdom the will of God is done perfectly, as it already is up in heaven. And God's will? Well, in Jesus' teaching we have already seen how it is marked by a sense of compassion and equality before God. It is a kingdom of peace, where people of different sorts, men, women, Samaritans, Jews, all dwell under the guidance of mercy and justice. Relationships will be defined not by power, prestige, and position, but by God's grace.

It is a kingdom of forgiveness. God's nature is to be forgiving; and so it is in the nature of the people of God to be forgiving, to offer new chances, new beginnings. To offer reconciliation. In the Kingdom of God come upon earth, it will not be a surprise to see a Samaritan helping a Jew, but it will be a surprise to find a highway robber anywhere.

Oh, by the way, Remember a few years ago when the Prayer of Jabez became such a best-seller. One focus of that prayer was an individual to pray, "Lord, Bless ME. Enlarge MY kingdom." The Lord's Prayer invites a different attitude: Lord, let our community be about the business of enlarging YOUR kingdom. Which, of course might be why Jesus instructed us to pray his prayer instead of simply telling us to look back there in Chronicles.

But I digress.

And as we end our prayer, we ask for rescue from the evil one. And folks, in this world in which God's will is not yet perfectly done, we know there is a lot of evil out there.

Define the evil powers of this world as you will. Satan. Or evil. Or the isms: Isms are limited

perspectives that claim for themselves divine truth: Some are good, some are evil, but all fall short when they claim our ultimate allegiance ahead of God. Racism, Communism, socialism, capitalism, sexism, patriotism. Now patriotism seems good to us in America. I'm proud to have the flag in the sanctuary. But the flag must not be more important to us than the cross. And patriotism in Nazi Germany, with a swastika on the altar. . . that sort of patriotism is evil.

Oh, and by the way, we also might be careful of bibleism. Bibleism might or not be a word, but it means to treat the Bible as a weapon to defend our preconceived notions, rather than as a gift which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit leads us away from our values and towards God's as defined in Jesus Christ.

Or we can define evil in more personal terms: selfishness or lust or will to power. In the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to rescue us from all evil, even the evil that lurks within us all. From those temptations that would make us become less than the people God has called us to be. To free us from our temptations to accept things the way they are, lest we risk too much.

So, the Lord's Prayer is not about how to get to heaven. It is not about changing God's mind. It is about conforming our minds, our faith, our lives, and our witness to God's purposes. It's about expressing the expectation of an earth in which some day, God's will will be perfectly done. That day is not yet, but it is a possibility. And so it is optimistic: in that it trusts that God continues to act within us and among us. It trusts that history is moving forward to a time when indeed God's dreams and purposes will be fulfilled. And the in the prayer is God's invitation to us to do our part and to define ourselves first and foremost as his people, claimed by his love, delivered by his power, and participants in his purposes.

And so we pray the Lord's Prayer, not so that we can bend God's will to ours, but that our hearts, our minds, our will might be shaped by his.