

Magic Words?  
Luke 11:1-13

At supper one night, my brother John said, "Would you pass me the bread?" My mother said, "What's the magic word?" He replied, "Would you pass me the bread, NOW." And we all laughed, because among the children, he was the least likely ever to forget to say "please."

But the magic word. That's what the disciples were looking for from Jesus. They wanted Jesus to teach them the secret words that would make prayer powerful and effective. There was even a vague sense of minor reproach about the request: after all, Jesus, John the Baptist has already shared with his disciples a special prayer sure to get God's attention. So, what about it, Jesus?

We might be like that ourselves, at least a little bit. A few years ago, a book called the Prayer of Jabez became quite popular. Here at last, nestled in the hinterlands of 1 Chronicles was the magic prayer, of blessing and abundance.

But when the disciples asked Jesus for some magic words of prayer, he didn't happen to mention the prayer of Jabez as a model prayer. In fact, something quite different, known to us today, with just a few words changed, as the Lord's Prayer.

What does it mean to be a community whose prayer life is centered in this particular prayer?

Now, because the Lord's Prayer has become central to the prayer life of the church, and because in English the Lord's prayer has a majestic cadence and formal air about it with archaic language such as "art" and "thy" and "thine," and because at least a portion of the Lord's Prayer follows this request for special words with which to approach God, we tend to think that this is it: the special secret magical incantation that will give us access to God.

But actually, I think Jesus intended something almost the opposite. Jesus' model of prayer is one that comes from the heart, with simple words instead of ornate.

How are we to pray? What's the magic word? No magic word, just four lines of prayer, and then much commentary.

Now, in his commentary, Jesus describes his view of the nature of God. And it strikes me that what we believe about God will determine how we approach God in prayer, or even if we dare approach God in prayer. Of course, Jesus invites us to draw near to God in prayer, so let's take a few moments to see how Jesus understands the nature of God in this context of prayer.

What is God like? Like a man who is woken up in the middle of the night because the neighbor needs some bread. The man might not be too pleased, because his door is already locked and the kids are all piled into bed with him (this in a culture when most houses just had one room anyway), and besides it's the middle of the night, so I can't help you. But then he does, not because he's a friend, but because his neighbor was so bold.

God is like that, Jesus says, to encourage us to pray. Yes, we might not always live as God's friend, but he still invites us to come to him boldly in prayer. You know, I think sometimes we live hoping that somehow God will not really notice us, that our thoughts and actions will slip under the divine radar. The bad news is: God does notice. The good news is: God still loves us.

And that's Jesus' final point. He says, if your kid asks you for a fish, will you give him a snake instead? Of course not. Or an egg, would you give him a scorpion? Of course not. Well, then, if you, who are evil (compared at least to God's holiness), give your children good gifts, well, then your heavenly father, who is not evil but good, will treat you all the better.

He will, in fact, give you the Holy Spirit, the spirit of guidance and comfort and strength and hope, if you will.

Jesus believes in a God who is on our side. Even when we are evil. Even when we sin. This is the God to whom we pray. A God who loves us, who wants what is best for us. A God always willing to offer His spirit. A God calling us back to righteousness and back into relationship with him.

And it is prayer that opens this relationship with God. Ask, and it will be given. Knock, and the door will be open. Now, we have to be a little careful here, Jesus is not saying, pray for a mansion and you get a mansion, pray for a yacht and you get a yacht. He is saying, pray for a God-filled life, a life filled with Godly abundance, and that prayer will be answered.

We don't have to convince God to love us. He already does. We don't have to convince or plead or cajole or beg God to work powerfully in our lives. He already is.

So if God is like this, how then do we pray?

Is there in fact a magic word, a right combination of words that will grab God's attention? No, because there doesn't need to be. God isn't waiting for the right words. He's waiting for what comes from our heart, in whatever form.

I think the disciples might have been a little shocked at Jesus' prayer, because it was so simple. At a time when prayers would use flowing language and pages upon pages extolling the wonder and nature of God, trying to butter Him up, if you will, Jesus simply says, pray this.

"Father." Suddenly God is not a remote angry judge, but a loving parent (an ideal father, if you will), concerned with the well-being of his children. Yes God is hallowed, holy, other, but as he watches over us in heaven it is with a gentle and compassionate heart. Yet, calling God holy reminds us God probably does not really need our advice. We really don't need to tell God what God needs to do. He probably already has a pretty good idea.

But what to pray for? Now here's where it get a little tricky. Because sometimes our prayers tend to be intensely personal: and our prayers tend to focus more on what we want rather than what we need, and on ourselves rather than others. Sort of like this report sent to me:

*After starting a new diet, I altered my drive to town to avoid passing my favorite bakery. I accidentally drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window were a host of goodies. I felt this was no accident, so I prayed, "Lord, it's up to you ... if you want me to have any of those delicious goodies, create a parking place for me directly in front of the bakery."*

*And sure enough, He answered my "prayer." There it was, a parking space right in front. . . the eighth time I circled the block.*

But did you notice, that in the Lord's prayer, it is not "me", but "us and our?" And it is a prayer not about trivial things but important things.

A prayer for us to live life the way God intends us to live life. A prayer to live in such a way that we participate in bringing about God's dreams for this world.

"Your kingdom come." God's kingdom, with mercy and compassion and justice as its watchwords. That's the purpose that makes the church the church. That's the purpose that gives your life and my life meaning. That we live as witnesses to God's kingdom until it comes fully upon the earth.

"Our daily bread." Echoes here of the manna in the wilderness, when the children of Israel received just enough every day to sustain them on their journey. The word "manna" refers to the miraculous food, that they believed God himself gave to them. Literally translated, "manna"

means “what’s this?” What’s this is God’s giving them what they need to sustain their journey. When we pray, we pray trusting God will provide for our journey.

And then sin. Forgive us our sin, because we also forgive everyone who sins against us. For Jesus, forgiveness, reconciliation, is at the center of a God-inspired journey. On the cross, he echoed this call, “Father forgive them.” Much more needs to be said about forgiveness, but that will have to wait for another time. But for now, let’s let Jesus’ words echo in our heart, that there is power in forgiveness, both for the one forgiven and the one who forgives.

“Lead us not into temptation.” Or testing. The implication is a prayer that when we are tested or tempted, that God will not abandon us, that God will give us the strength to live as God’s people. People in Jesus’ day sometimes had to choose between family and faith or freedom or faith. In our day, sometimes we have to choose between popularity and faith. Or sometimes we simply become discouraged because there seems to be so much wrong in our lives. And so we pray to be faithful in the midst of the temptation to give up on faith.

Lord, give us the magic words, give us just the right words to pray. And Jesus’ response is something like this: God is neither impressed when we use impressive words and phrases nor discouraged when our prayers are tentative and humble and stumbling and bumbling.

Because Jesus invites us to focus not on our prayer, but the God to whom we pray: a God of righteousness and compassion and blessing and forgiveness. A God who wants us live lives that

are blessed and abundant. A God whose abundance includes the promise of enough to sustain us on our daily journey, a God who invites us to live in hope for his kingdom to come completely and perfectly, a God who invites us to live lives seeking and offering forgiveness, a God who give us strength to stand firm in every trial.

Magic words of prayer? No, Jesus invites us to live, and pray, simply, so that we might know more fully this God to whom we pray. And knowing him more fully, to follow him more closely. With hope. Trust. Assurance. Amen.