

“Food for the Journey: Prayer” GPPC 7-24-16  
Jeremiah 29:7-14, Luke 11:1-13

We continue this Sunday with the third sermon in our five-part summer sermon series entitled “Food for the Journey.” If you went away on a journey, say the spiritual journey of a lifetime, what would you need to pack? We’ve already packed worship and community. This Sunday we pop open our luggage and nestled there among the clothing, electronic gadgets, and books is prayer. What are a few things Jesus and the Bible teach about us prayer? And how might each of us experience a deeper prayer life?

Luke tells us that Jesus was praying in a certain place. And after he finished praying his disciples came to him with a request. “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” In other words, prayer is *not* something merely automatic. It’s something, like worship, that we learn to do over a lifetime of practice. And Jesus even supplies a pattern for our prayers. He says, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name.”

Jesus says begin by speaking to God as Father. Think about what that *means* and what it does *not* mean. It does not mean that God is male. God is not a he *or* a she, but God is also not an “it” either. God transcends gender that applies to creatures.

And if we pray to God as Father, our language is still inadequate to capture God, because we’re just human beings using human language to try to describe God who is beyond our fully describing or understanding. The Bible gives us dozens of other words to speak of God—Shepherd, Rock, Light, Lord, I am who I am, and so on. Some of us may use those other words to pray to God. But whatever language we use to pray to God, God still remains beyond our grasp and control.

So when we pray to God as Father or Parent, what are we doing? We are being respectful and grateful for one thing. As a New Testament Greek dictionary points out, Father here means “the supreme deity, who is responsible for the origin and care of all that exists.” To speak to God as Father or Parent is a title of respect and gratitude for the One who created everything and everyone and who causes existence to continue.

But if God is our Father or Parent, then we are also God's offspring. We're God's children, created in the image of God. So we know God loves us and that we share in our very being some of who God is. Because God is Father or Parent, each one of us is sacred and meant to be treated as such. No matter our politics, our religion, our sexuality, our nationality, or any other aspect of our being, because God is our Father or Parent, each one of us is sacred.

And then Jesus says, "Hallowed by your name." To say that God's name is holy is also a form of praise. God's name is to be treated with reverence, because God is to be treated with reverence. God's name is not to be invoked for selfish reasons or used to lie to people or, heaven forbid, as justification to abuse people. So whenever we hear the word "God" used in conversation or in the news or by an elected official let us perk up our ears. How is the holy name being used—for good or for evil, hallowed or desecrated?

And then Jesus says we are to pray several requests, "Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our

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sins, because we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

In the 2003 movie comedy “Bruce Almighty,” a disgruntled news reporter played by Jim Carrey rages against God because his life is not what he’d hoped it would be. God, played by Morgan Freeman, says, “Fine. You don’t like the way I run the universe? You try it for awhile.” God steps aside and lets Carrey run the universe for a week. So Carrey uses his divine powers to humiliate his enemies, to enhance his love life with his girlfriend, played by Jennifer Anniston, to become the news anchor, and even to house-train his dog. And Carrey loves it for a time. But then he begins to hear and see the terrible crush of human need pressing in upon him. People praying for the necessities of life, for healing from sickness, restoration of relationships, relief from terrible suffering. Carrey is drowning in the tide of real human need. And any answer he makes to each prayer has unforeseen repercussions elsewhere in the world. All the world is tied together in a web of prayer sometimes

answered as we wish and sometimes not. And over time, Carrey begins to see the selfishness and shallowness of his own prayers.

Jesus does not tell us to pray for selfish, shallow things. He tells us to pray for God's kingdom, God's reign of universal love, joy, and peace, to come. We're to pray for God's perfect peace, God's shalom of wholeness and fullness of life for *every* human being and for *all* the creation to come. Your kingdom come, we pray.

And we're told to pray for our daily bread, asking God not only for the food we need but for all the other essentials of life, not for tomorrow, not for next year or twenty years from now, but for *this* day. So we remember our radical dependence upon God daily. We do not become arrogant and imagine we've provided for ourselves or that we've stored up enough savings or stuff that we no longer need God. And we do not pester God for the trivial. No. We ask God for our daily bread.

And part of what we need daily is forgiveness. We need God to forgive our daily sins and we need God to empower us to forgive others, just as we've been forgiven. A character in one of Wendell Berry's

novels says, “No man’s strength is equal to his wickedness. God has to forgive us before he can love us.” (Wendell Berry, *Nathan Coulter*, 61.) God does forgive us and love us. And though it may take time, God also empowers us to forgive others, not only for their benefit but also so that we will not have to carry the heavy burden of hatred and anger and revenge.

Then Jesus says we’re to make a remarkable request. “And do not bring us to the time of trial.” We ask God not to try us, not to allow us to be tempted—doesn’t that seem odd? We know Jesus endured trials and temptations, and he remained utterly faithful. And if we read Scripture we know God allowed other people in the Bible to be tempted. Sometimes they remained faithful and sometimes they did not. So why would God bring us to a time of trial or temptation? And why would we pray for God not to bring us to such a time?

Maybe our resistance to temptation makes us stronger spiritually. And maybe our enduring some sort of trial can cause us to be greater and more empathetic people. In each case, we may realize anew our utter dependence upon God, not upon ourselves.

But this all seems dangerous and troubling, doesn't it? While we're busy showing how strong we are against temptation, we end up giving in to temptation. While we're claiming that our endurance in the midst of trial is making us better people, we fall apart or we become vain. Who wants more temptation and more trials in life? Not I! And maybe that's the point. Maybe what Jesus means here is, "Lord, we know you want us to grow as Christians as we face temptations and trials. But we dare to remind you that life is hard enough. Don't give us more than we can handle." I know this sounds impertinent to be speaking to God this way. But I wonder if that's what it means.

And impertinence leads to Jesus' last comments about prayer here. He says, "You know how it is. A friend shows up at some ungodly hour asking you to lend him bread. Because he's so impertinent, so shameless, you're not going to turn him down. So keep searching. You'll find what you need. Keep knocking. You'll receive what you need. After all, if somebody's child asks for a fish, the parent won't give a snake. And if anybody's child requests an egg, the parent won't gift

wrap a scorpion. For heaven's sake, God's infinitely more loving than human parents. And how much more will the heavenly Father/Parent give the Holy Spirit to those who ask God?"

So Jesus gives us not only a pattern for prayer, but a rationale for prayer. He says we pray with respect and gratitude and praise. We pray asking for God's reign of perfect peace and wholeness for the universe to come. We pray asking for our daily needs to be met, for God's forgiveness and the ability to forgive others, and not to be given more temptation or challenge than we can handle. We pray for all these things and more.

But Jesus says even if we do not get precisely what we asked for, everything we suppose we want, if we keep praying with a kind of holy audacity and persistence, we will receive what we truly want and need after all. The Holy Spirit. God in all God's fullness. The final answer to our prayers. As one Christian wrote, "The end of prayer is not to win concessions from Almighty Power, but to have communion with Almighty Love." (Percy C. Ainsworth, *Weavings*, Vol. XXII, Number 4, 36.)

So how do we build a life of prayer? Again, we take cues from Jesus who prayed daily, who prayed with Scripture, who prayed specifically, and who prayed with audacity and persistence.

First, pick a quiet time and place for prayer. Try to set aside at least 10 or 15 minutes a day to pray. Read the Bible along with your prayers, and maybe use a devotional resource. Jo and I are happy to recommend some to you.

Second, pray specifically. Consider keeping a small notebook and pencil to write down things and people you're grateful for, as well people, places, and situations that have special need for prayer. As you scan the newspaper or the Internet news, offer what you read up to God.

Third, be bold and persistent about it. I know a person who told me her prayers were finally answered after 40 years. Sometimes our prayers are answered as a situation or another person changes. Other times our prayers are answered as *we* are changed. Sometimes it's both.

Many years ago, when I was a young pastor, thirty-one years old, I was asked to speak at the installation service for a veteran pastor coming to a new church in our presbytery. I was asked to give the charge to this man who had been a pastor for decades, while I'd only been a pastor for a little over a year. So I quoted *extensively* from Eugene Peterson's fine little book on pastoral integrity called *Working the Angles*. I urged the incoming pastor to follow Peterson's advice and to focus on three angles: prayer, reading Scripture, and giving spiritual direction. I also suggested, ala Peterson, that he get a spiritual director to help him in his journey. My comments seemed to be well-received.

Afterwards, at the reception of punch and cookies, I was approached by a small, soft-spoken, elderly man. He thanked me for my words, told me his name was Jack Houdeshel, that he was a retired pastor, and a personal friend of Eugene Peterson's. We chatted a few minutes. Then he asked, "So, do you have a spiritual director?" "Um, no I don't," I said. "Well," he said, "I'd be happy to be yours." I waited a few months, then contacted him, and went to his house for our first

meeting. While I was there, he showed me a notebook he kept filled with careful, tiny handwriting. And there on one of the pages was my name. Jack had been praying for me since I had graduated seminary and arrived at my first church. He'd been praying for me daily for about a year and half. Jack became my spiritual director, assigning me readings and each month asking, "So, how is it with you and the Lord?" Jack listened and discussed and helped me navigate those first five treacherous years of ministry, a time when so many clergy drop out. Then I moved to a new church in a new town. I wrote Jack's name in my own prayer notebook. Over the years, we exchanged a couple of letters. Eventually, Jack's beloved wife, Skip, died and he moved to a retirement home.

Jack died last November at age 92. I believe he prays for me still. I know I pray thanksgiving to God for him.

We never know where our prayers will lead, do we? We just don't know. So we pray. We pray. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal