

“Teach Us to Pray” GPPC 7-28-19
Hosea 1:2-10, Luke 11:1-13

Luke says Jesus was praying. He did that a lot, you know. He did it so much, he gives us the impression that prayer is important. And after Jesus finished praying, one of his disciples (we don't know which one) said, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”

Now Jesus could've said, “Well, just pray as John taught you. He was pretty good at it.” But he did not say that. Or Jesus could've said, “It doesn't matter how you pray. Just do it.” But he did not say that either. Instead, he answered the request by speaking to the whole group of disciples, and, of course, to us.

Jesus taught a pattern for praying, what we often call The Lord's Prayer. It's a prayer that Matthew also records with slightly different and more elaborate wording. Matthew's version of the prayer is what we say as a congregation every Sunday, actually using the language from the King James Version of the Bible, a version that includes some additional words at the end. “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”

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Why the extra words? Because the King James Version of the Bible relied on early Greek manuscripts not as ancient or accurate as the manuscripts used for the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible we use in the pulpit and pews. Most likely this beautiful and extra bit of prayer in the King James Version, what we call a doxology, was added by a scribe later on.

But today we look at Luke's version of the prayer in the New Revised Standard Version. Jesus began, "Father, hallowed be your name."

"Father," Jesus said. The word is not really concerned about God's gender (God transcends gender) but about who God is, the very nature of God. God is not merely the Creator who made us and all the universe (as impressive as that is). No, even more impressive is that we pray to God who passionately cares for us, who is involved in our lives, who is infinitely more loving than even the very best fathers and mothers are.

So imagine the very best fathers and mothers for a moment. What do you see? Do you see parents who sacrifice for their children, sometimes even sacrificing their lives? Do you see parents who go

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through pregnancy and childbirth, a million feedings and diaper changes and clean-ups? Can you hear people listening and quieting tantrums? Can you feel them holding little hands? And then as the children grow, sitting through off-key music concerts. “Buddy, you sounded just like the New York Philharmonic today.” Standing in the heat, cold, and rain for sports. “Sweetie, Megan Rapinoe’s got nothing on you.” Taking kids to church even when they complain. “Yep. I know you’re tired, but this is what we do on Sundays. Eat your breakfast and get dressed. We’re leaving in 15 minutes.”

Do you know what I’m talking about? A tornado comes roaring through one of those mid-west towns in Tornado-alley. And the parent gives her life protecting her child from the storm. God is that kind of love and so much more. “Father,” begins the prayer.

“Hallowed be your name.” This is a way of saying that God is fundamentally different from us. God is not merely a nicer version of you and me. God is in fact the divine “other.”

You’ll remember how people react when they encounter God or God’s messengers in the Bible. Nobody ever says, “Hey God, what’s

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up? Wanna hang out for a while?” No. When people encounter God or God’s messengers up close, they are usually terrified, not because God is mean but because God is other. God is beyond our comprehension. And though the word is overused these days, God is truly *awesome*, invoking awe.

And because God is all these things and more, to say “Hallowed be your name,” is also a way of describing how we can and should respond to God. If God is “hallowed” or “holy,” then we can and should respond with reverence for God, a kind of respect for God that we give not only as we gather on Sundays for worship but also as we pray and also as we live. If we treat God the way God deserves to be treated, then we will try to say and do what we believe God desires. In fact, if we say, “Hallowed be your name,” but do not try to say and do what God desires, this is offensive to God.

Maybe that’s one reason why the lectionary places this troubling reading from Hosea beside with our reading from Luke. Using some really disturbing imagery and action (that we will not explore this Sunday with little ones sitting out there), God is furious at Israel for

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making something and someone else Lord. As theologian Paul Tillich pointed out, whatever is most important in your life *is* your God. Maybe in Hosea's time it is money or security or pleasure or power as God. Sounds kind of contemporary, doesn't it? In our day we might also add sports or family or country as God.

As one Bible scholar points out, God is also angry with Israel about "...the sins of its political life... [and God gives] an especially negative evaluation of Israel's kings and the self-centered, corrupt, and violent practices associated with the kings... [and God condemns Israel's] reliance on its own military power...a false security that instead would destroy the nation." (Bruce C. Birch, *Hosea, Joel, and Amos*, Westminster Bible Companion Series, 13.)

That's what God says to Israel back then. And what does God say to you and me and to our nation today?

So Jesus says the next part of the prayer is, "Your kingdom come." Again, this is a two-pronged request. We are to ask for God's kingdom, God's reign to come in all its fullness. Ask God to go ahead and bring in the completeness of God's will right now, no more waiting. And what

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will that completeness, that kingdom be? It will be the Hebrew word for peace; it will be shalom. And what does shalom mean? Not just the absence of war but the presence of all that good, kind, just, merciful, loving.

So here is the second prong of the request. We know God is the One who finally brings shalom to pass. We can't do it through our own efforts. But at the same time, when we pray "Your kingdom come," we are asking for God to work in and through us as instruments of shalom.

This is another reason why sometimes well-intentioned people are wrong when they say the church should have nothing to do with social justice or with what's happening in the political world. When the kingdom comes, when shalom comes, all of life will be made complete and perfect. But for now, when we pray "Your kingdom come" we are also asking God to use us to make sure everybody has enough to eat and drink, safe places to live, an environment cherished not degraded, decent education for every person, no racism, sexism, ageism, or homophobia but equal treatment and equal opportunities for all. And the list goes on.

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It is our privilege to be allowed to be a part of God's coming shalom.

"Your kingdom come."

And "Give us each day our daily bread." Notice it's not, "Give *me* each day..." It's "Give *us* each day our daily bread." The paradox is that God knows us through and through, and knows our needs. Yet Jesus tells us to ask for our daily bread. Why? Maybe two things.

First, we are sometimes a forgetful people. We have a tendency to imagine that somehow we've gotten our daily bread on our own because we're so hard-working, so smart and resourceful, such careful planners, such superior people, especially compared to hungry and thirsty people elsewhere. If only those people had been as virtuous as we are.

Nope.

We have nothing against hard work, resourcefulness, and diligent planning. But at the end of the day, God made each one of us and God creates the food we eat and God gives us the ability to earn money to buy the food. And if we don't have the ability to buy our food, God expects the rest of the community to share gladly with us, and to help us get back on our feet. And if we can't get back on our feet, then the

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community has the honor and responsibility of making sure we have enough to eat. So you see us as a congregation giving money to food banks, and serving food to the hungry and homeless at Hot Dish and Hope, and giving money to Greensboro Urban Ministry, and constantly bugging our elected representatives to fund the SNAP program (formerly known as food stamps).

Second, we notice that we are to pray for our “daily bread,” not for enough bread to make us greedy or arrogant or to deny others their share of the bread. “Give us each day our *daily* bread.”

“And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” Luke’s version uses the word “sins.” And this can be translated various ways, but one good way is simply to say “failures.”

(François Bovon, *Luke 2*, Hermeneia Series, 91.) Forgive us our sins; forgive us our failures, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

Our prayer to God should be honest. “Lord, forgive my sins, forgive my failures. And empower me to forgive people who’ve sinned against me, failed me.” Notice we have to be humble enough to admit

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that we do indeed sin. We certainly do fail. We're really good at failing.

Heck, some of us can fail before we even get out of bed in the morning.

So we need lots of grace. And we need God to help us give lots of grace to others, because sometimes it's very difficult to forgive and sometimes it may take a while for us to be able to forgive. But we forgive not only for others' benefit but for ours, so we aren't stuck with the weight of hatred, or, God forbid, revenge (the most physically and emotionally destructive emotion there is). As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear."

Forgive us our sins, Forgive us our failures, Lord. And empower us, lead us to forgive others their sins, their failures with us.

"And do not bring us to the time of trial."

Scholars argue about the meaning of this, but it may mean acquit us at the final judgment. Or it may mean "Help us get through whatever trials and temptations we face now. Don't let them overwhelm us." We do pray for God's help, don't we? Especially when we're facing

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something difficult or even facing the end of our lives, Jesus says we are to pray to God and ask for help.

I frankly do not know how prayer works. There are times when we pray about something and, wham! our prayers are answered as we'd hoped immediately. Other times we pray about something and the answer we wish for does not come at all or it seems to take forever. Somebody says God always answers prayer with yes, no, or wait. Maybe that's true, but tell that to the parent whose child is sick or who has died. Tell that to the victim of violence, or to the person who is in daily physical or emotional agony.

I don't know how prayer works. I just try to pray often, usually sitting at a desk at home with a couple devotionals, a Bible, a list of people (some of you) to pray for, and a journal. I don't feel particularly holy about it, but prayer is one way God forms us as a people. So I just try to do it regularly, along with some walking, running, and weight-lifting. But I don't know why some prayers get answered the way they do. I don't know if it makes a difference if a bunch of people pray for someone or something or if just one person prays. I don't know why

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some people suffer so stinking much and others hardly at all. I don't know. But God knows, and that's enough for now.

Jesus ends his instruction on prayer with kind of a long section about a friend showing up at your house at midnight asking for three loaves of bread. And, no, you don't say, "Three loaves at midnight—are you insane?" And you don't call the police and have him arrested. But just because he's so persistent, actually the Greek is better translated as because he's so *shameless*, you hand over the bread.

And Jesus says, "Look it's also like you as a parent with your kid. You don't give the kid a snake or a scorpion. You give him a fish or an egg. You don't give him crummy stuff. You give him good stuff." Jesus says, "Well, for heavens' sake, how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask God."

In other words, no matter what we're asking for--God's reign, daily bread, forgiveness, the ability to forgive, the ability to endure--whatever it is, in the end what we really want is God, God's very self. And that, says Jesus, is what we'll finally get.

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We don't really know how prayer works. But we know we're told to pray. To pray persistently. Shamelessly. Expectantly. To the One who created us. Who loves us as a perfect Parent. Who finally gives us what we truly need, God's very self. And so we pray. And so we pray. Amen.

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