

August 6, 2020

Sermon Title: Teach me to pray

Scripture: Matthew 6:9-13

During these days, weeks, and months of COVID-19, I have found myself wondering how I should be praying? I have wondered what it means to be honest with God about how I am feeling. I have wondered if God cares how I'm feeling. I have wondered if God is even hearing my prayers when I pray them. And then one day, as I was rounding on my unit in the hospital, one of my nurses asked me if I could serve her communion. She explained that her church had closed due to COVID-19 and that it would be really meaningful to remember Christ's suffering and resurrection, and to celebrate our own salvation and healing through this amazing gift. And so, after going to the Spiritual Care office and collecting our hospital communion liturgy and the host, the nurse and I met in the supply closet on the hospital unit. And there, surrounded by sterile water, IV ports, bandages, and so much more; I served the nurse communion, we celebrated the Lord's supper, and then prayed the prayer that Jesus himself taught us:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from the evil one.’ (Matthew 6: 9-13, NIV)

There are moments in my life when scripture leaps off the page and words I've known my whole life tumble into focus before me. Reciting the Lord's prayer with the nurse that day was one of those moments. It was as if I could hear generations praying this same prayer before me—in the midst of the adversity they were facing. The supply closet had become a cathedral, a holy place,

and I had experienced God in a surprising way. Noticing the sacred moment of communion and praying the Lord's prayer felt like God's graciousness was being extended to me through my frustration and questions. It felt like God was encouraging me, "Look, I've given you words to pray when you don't know what to say. You can pray these words."

So I'd like to invite us to take a closer look at the Lord's prayer. What might Jesus be teaching us in this prayer? Is this prayer applicable in the full gamut of emotions we are experiencing throughout this pandemic? How might the Lord's prayer challenge or complement our pray life?

One of the first things that jumps out to me about the Lord's prayer is the use of plural words, "our" and "us" is used throughout the prayer rather than "my" and "I". I believe this reminds us that we not only pray for each other, we are also praying with each other. It's a call to our corporate life as Christians, and our relationship with God. As folks of Church of the Brethren, we know a thing or two about community. But it seems that Jesus is calling us to, even in our prayers, remember those we partner with in our Christian life. "Our Father" It's a reminder of our commitment we have made to the church, to one another, and to God. And really, during this time when the buzz phrase is, "We're in this together" what better time to pray corporately and alone.

Additionally, I think we have to consider the dichotomy between "Father" and "in heaven". "The fact that we can even call God 'our Father' informs us that Jesus is bestowing upon us 'something of his own priceless [relationship with] God.'"¹ Jesus refers to God as his father throughout the gospels, but in the book of Matthew, this is the first we see this invitation extended to us as well. God is Jesus's father, but God is also *our Father*! It reminds me of the proclamation that we find in 1 John 3:1 "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

But, it seems that Jesus does not want us to become too chummy with God, because the next phrase truly differentiates us from God, "Holy be your name". "When we approach God in prayer we ought to recognize that there is a great distance between God and us, a difference at

¹ "How to Pray: Matthew 6:9-15", in *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth* R Kent Hughes, ed., (Wheaton, IL: 2013) pg 166.

least as vast as between heaven and earth.”² God remains almighty, unknown, unworldly. Yes, there is a nearness, but there is also a depth that we cannot comprehend. “Holy is your name!”

And it seems that with the location set, “in heaven”, the prayer begins to slowly descend to earth. “Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven”. What strikes me most about this phrase is the way the kingdoms of this world have shown their true selves these days. The stabilities of governments have waivered, economies crumble; these kingdoms cannot sustain us or themselves in the grave reality of COVID-19. I have also been challenged to think about the smaller kingdoms I try to maintain in my own life, the tranquility of my home, or sense of routine I get from going to work each day—these little kingdoms also falter, when I’ve had just a few too many minutes with my spouse on the weekend or when new hospital protocol is introduced and I had just become accustomed to the last wave. Our kingdoms; whether personal or communal have been shaken. And so, it seems an extraordinary thing to ask for God’s Kingdom to come; not only is it petition, but it is also a posture of surrender. “We have tried, Lord, and failed. Come, Lord Jesus, come.” However, with our church roots in the radical pietist and anabaptist movement, I believe we not only pray these words, but we also put them into action. Each time our witness of peace enters the community, God’s kingdom draws nearer; each time our witness of God’s acceptance and love are extended to those on the margins, God’s kingdom draws nearer. Taking part in God’s kingdom is a radical commitment, one steeped in a the countercultural, upside down Kingdom Jesus taught us about in the Beatitudes. And so, although it takes great faith, courage, and humility; we solely pray with my words and my feet and hands, “let your kingdom come, let your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

And it seems that the theme of social justice continues as Jesus roots us even more firmly in our earthly lives, “Give us this day our daily bread.” It’s not a plead for extravagance, it’s perhaps an echo of the Isralites when they relied on mana and quail in the wilderness. Praying for my daily bread means praying for what I need. It’s about the dynamic relationships between God and us; are we taking account for one another during this time? The hospital I work at shared a sobering statistic the other week:

² “How to Pray: Matthew 6:9-15”, Hughes, 166.

- Black, Latinx and Pacific Islander communities in LA are experiencing at least twice the rates of death compared to whites.
- High poverty areas in LA experience four times the rate of death compared to low poverty areas.
- South LA and Central LA have twice the infection rates compared to West LA and the South Bay.

The data mirrors longstanding systemic inequities and racism in Los Angeles County, “give us this day our daily bread” could mean advocacy work about health care in our community. “Give us this day our daily bread” may be wearing our mask even when it’s super hot and super annoying (I’ve been there). “Give us this day our daily bread” could mean sharing our resources so that others can have a little bit more. But I don’t mean to spiritualize this part of the prayer, I believe Jesus is calling on us to rely on God for what we need, and reminding us that, as a part of Jesus’s body (the church) we are a part of this generous work too!

At the beginning of the prayer we were in God’s throne room, but now we have entered the earth, but now it seems that the prayer enters our very souls, “Forgives us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” This is by far the most difficult part of the prayer for me. Because, I have a bit of a perfectionist complex. It’s not that I think I’m perfect, I just really really try to be, and this means that it’s hard for me ask God for forgiveness and it’s hard for me to ask others for forgiveness. Again, I think Jesus is pointing us back to God’s goodness, and implicating us—to be swept up in the extravagant grace of God. The other day, my supervisor shared with me about a grief practice he participated in; everyone was given a piece of cloth, and as they wanted to they tore it to shreds. It was about the sound, the feel, and the strength of ripping. And I think of the temple curtain being torn in two when Jesus died on the cross. The holy of holies in the temple had separated us from God for too long, and through Jesus we don’t have to feel the grief of sin anymore. And, I’ve also noticed that I learn how to accept God’s gift of forgiveness more in my own life, I can more easily extend forgiveness to others when they have hurt me.

And then we arrive at end of the prayer, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” We could not have concluded any further from where we started. Our heavenly Father to “deliver us from evil”. It’s the prayer of a human; vulnerable, fragile, a human who experiences bad things, but it is a prayer to a strong God. A God of protection, provision and power. “In Greek the

first word of the Lord's prayer is 'father' and the last words are 'evil one'. The structural point then is something like: As children of Jesus's Father, who live our daily lives between God and the devil, we must recognize the warnings here and therefore offer up in this last petition a real and 'raw cry for help' — 'Help me, Lord, to remain faithful to you.'"³ It's the distance between the beginning and end that make it so powerful, God has descended to dwell with us, Emmanuel, God with us, Jesus—the one who has taught us and show us the way to the father. Jesus, teach us to pray, so Jesus came to earth.

Lord's prayer celebrates; the nearness and distance of God; the now but not yet of God's kingdom; the forgiveness we receive and the forgiveness we strive to share; and the triumph we are sure of in the midst of daily struggle. The Lord's prayer makes sense of our yearnings, it celebrates our faithfulness while reminding us that we are uniquely human. I think trauma, like the corporate trauma we are experiencing can bottle up sometimes, and I believe having spiritual practices and religious language really helps us to cope. We are powerless at this time, we are deeply in touch with our humanity each day and so we may feel vulnerable and scared. Staying connected to God, staying connected to church will help. We heal by increasing our tolerance to be uncomfortable. The tolerance expands our capacity to change. And please be warned, the world needs people like us in it.

Mr. Rodger's once said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping'." As Christians we are the helpers, we are the hands and feet of Christ, and the world needs people who are willing to step up right now. We are the ears and eyes of Christ. We are here for one another, though physically distant right now, we are here. We are here in the midst of this pandemic. And it's really challenging, so when it gets tough, think about how God meets us in the Lord's prayer, but literally moving from heaven to earth to be with us, and say the Lord's prayer, aloud or quietly, allow the words of our Christian heritage to root you in strength, peace and comfort. Amen

³ "How to Pray: Matthew 6:9-15", Hughes 173

Benediction:

May you know the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

May you walk in the ways of the Kingdom and be generous ambassadors of that Good News

May you be given what you need, forgive and be forgiven,

And protected always.

Go in peace.