

Reflections on the Lord's Prayer

Luke 11:1-13

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A disciple like us asks Jesus for guidance on prayer. I am glad he felt free enough to ask Jesus the question. Why do we pray? What are our expectations and intentions when we pray? Is there only one specific way to pray? Does it always have to involve words? We do find various forms of prayer in the Christian tradition. There is the more active and discursive way of using words such as we do in the Lord's prayer. We also have a strong tradition of silent receptive prayer or contemplation. Some teachers and many religious traditions also encourage practitioners to see all of life as a prayer when we do what we do with deliberate attentiveness, including washing the dishes. I would venture to say that there is wisdom, purpose and beauty in all of these.

The former Poet Laureate Seamus Heaney said, "If you have words, there's always a chance you'll find the way." The prayer Jesus taught us has this quality of helping us find the way both in our relationship with God and each other. These relationships are inextricably related. I would further venture to say that prayer is fundamentally always about relationship. It is a practice that is open to all of us. And, no, priests or ministers are not somehow closer to God or have better "service" or "reception" on their spiritual cell phones than anyone else by virtue of their office.

While I don't dare say that I fully understand the mystery of prayer, I don't experience it as a tool to change God's mind but as an experience that changes us.¹ This doesn't mean that we cannot pray for healing or other specific needs. Jesus is actually adamant in our passage that we should be very direct and persistent when we pray. He invites his listeners to imagine knocking on the door of an old friend in the middle of the night to ask for bread. Just the persistence of the knocking alone will be enough to yield the bread, let alone the friendship. Jesus goes on to say, "...Ask, and it will be given you, search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened

¹ We can find evidence of changing God's mind in the Hebrew Scriptures, for example Exodus 32:12-14.

for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches, finds and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Luke 11: 9-11).

Such words can ring hollow when what we ask for does not come to be. Just think of all the beautiful prayers on behalf of Julianna so many have spoken over the years only to see her end her life at age 15. Think of the many people who have prayed for an end to war in places where the fighting does not cease. Think of the many people praying for healing and not finding it, at least not in the way yearned for. This leaves many questions about whether God is all powerful and what that would even mean when God also leaves us freedom in a context of complete interconnectivity. God also appears to be all vulnerable alongside us. Still, when I hear Jesus saying, “Ask and you shall receive, search and you will find...”, I primarily hear an invitation to get engaged in our lives and our relationships. It’s like he is saying, ‘Get out there, ask, venture, try, get vulnerable, get connected, put yourself out there, and you will, at some deep and fundamental level, be enriched and transformed by it.’ If we want to sail, we must engage the wind.

Prayer does create energy and, at its best, can help us to feel more alive, more connected, even healed. That is to say, even when an illness is not cured, there can be healing and deepening of connection and love. Even in our frustration, the sheer honesty of what we say can put us in deeper touch with ourselves, with God and each other. Notice that Jesus says that the gift we receive in prayer is first and foremost the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13). This Spirit can help us find our way through any difficult experience and give us strength to live in life-giving ways. Prayer puts us in touch with our actual identity, our values, belonging and purpose. The prayer Jesus taught us can be an especially powerful avenue for this as it connects us also with God’s vision and purpose. In his book *The Greatest Prayer*, John Dominic Crossan describes the Prayer as: “a radical manifesto and a hymn of hope for all humanity in language addressed to all the earth.”

Luke's version of the prayer is the shortest available to us.² Luke begins with the simple word "Father." You may have heard interpretations that say that the Aramaic and Hebrew meaning of the word "Abba" is 'Daddy.' Not everyone agrees with this interpretation but, if it reflects Jesus' intent, you can't get more intimate and trusting than that - if you had a positive relationship with your father. There are passages in the Hebrew Bible that speak of the relationship between Israel and God as that of a father to his child (Deuteronomy 14:1) but it is not a common image. If this is indeed the tone Jesus meant to strike, the disciples would have been startled from the outset by such a presumption of intimacy. Keep in mind that the father Jesus is talking about stands in direct contrast to the Roman Emperor as the father of the nation. The emperor held supreme and often random and cruel power over his subjects. The Maori version of the Lord's Prayer which we spoke as our *Call To Worship* beautifully expresses the more life-giving and even pain bearing presence of this God whom Jesus invites us to address.

When we pray *hallowed be your name*, we are not only asked not to take God's name in vain. To hallow means to actively make holy or sacred. You may recall that the ancient Hebrews actually refrained from speaking God's name. Some believe that saying Yahwe, one of the ancient names for God, was akin to the sound we make when we breathe: Yah (inhale) and we (exhale) - reminding us that our very existence and our every breath is a gift from God (Richard Rohr teaches this). Hallowing God's name has the quality of acknowledging and strengthening our sense of awe and wonder, of not taking life for granted, of dedicating ourselves to serving God and God's creation within and beyond us. The Poet Jane Hirshfield once said, "I just needed to turn my life over to whoever came up with redwoods." This trusting seeing requires learning to see the world as God would have us see it and care for it, beyond our own projections based on our individual needs, fears, and desires. I get the sense that our exploitation of the earth for profit at the expense of sustainability, any labeling of people as inferior and "other" are expressions of such projecting rather

² We find longer versions in Matthew and in a non-canonical Christian teaching document from the second century called the *Didache*. The prayer is not mentioned in either Mark or John.

than the opening that comes from hallowing God's name.

How God views the world is most clearly visible to us in Jesus and his teachings about the Kingdom of God, this reign of the one whose name we are to make and keep holy. It is poignant that Jesus has us pray: "*Your kingdom come.*" This is about God's realm and not our private kingdoms and ambitions. It is a lived reality in which the poor receive good news, the oppressed go free and captives are released, to quote from Jesus' own manifesto in Luke 4:18-19). To pray for it to come is also to acknowledge that we are not ultimately in control but that we are simply called to be part of a dream, a process, a way of life free from debilitating fear and oriented toward the wellbeing of the world. We are part of this by asking, knocking on doors, searching and reaching out in response to that dream.

Renee Miller tells a brief story about how we distinguish whether we are serving that dream or working against it. A Rabbi once taught a disciple by saying: "If you are about to do something and you think it might lessen your love, then you will know it is sin. If you are about to do something and think it will increase your love, you will know that your will is in keeping with the will of God. That is what Abraham did" (Tales of the Hassidim). Carlos Castaneda, mystic and shaman, similarly asked: "Does this path have heart? If so it is a good path. If not, it is useless." To do things that increase love is to keep the will of God, is to dwell in the kingdom, is to make holy God's name. This reflects Jesus' teaching as well.

Add to this further that anytime Jesus speaks of God's kingdom, he is directly contrasting it to the empire of Cesar of his day who conquered and ruled the world through violence and domination. To call for the coming of God's kingdom was a deliberate and non-violent act of treason on behalf of a creative and transformative God. It easy for us to forget the offense of such a prayer to the ears of the powers that be (see Crossan).

To ask for our *daily bread* is a revolutionary act on a number of levels as well. As Crossan points out, Jesus was of a poorer class and lived among peasants and fishermen/women who were experiencing a great deal of hardship. Herod Antipas commercialized the lake where Jesus began his ministry among poor fisherfolk. Herod taxed the poor in order to raise money for building projects that would impress and appease Rome in exchange for greater power. By asking for our daily bread, we are again stating our dependence on God and not on whoever happens to have political or military power. This is still true in our own day.

We are also asserting the right of every being to food and sustenance in the context of community. We are saying “us” and “ours” not “my” and “mine” to the God who provided manna in the desert during the Exodus from slavery. In the desert, the wandering people were admonished to trust God’s provision rather than to hoard at each other’s expense. By asking for our daily bread, we are saying yes to God’s collaborative realm in which justice, peace, and care for all rule the day and go hand in hand.³ I wonder whether this prayer can also help us to move beyond seeing ourselves as separate from those who receive our charity to *existentially* embracing the fact that if one of us goes hungry, we all go hungry.⁴

The Lord’s prayer also admonishes *mutual forgiveness* because living in God’s kingdom or realm implies the intentional shaping of loving relationships. There are several aspects of what might be meant by forgiveness. Crossan claims that the original version of the prayer focuses on real financial debts and the unjust economic systems that create that debt. In other words, Jesus is encouraging us to pray for economic justice and restoration in a culture where people could be placed into bondage to work off their debt. Other commentators claim that Luke’s version is the oldest, which would suggest there was an additional emphasis on forgiving other

³ When we pray these words, we are also invited to remember that Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes by empowering others to give of themselves. Jesus received everyone at the table, spoke of himself as living bread, and made himself known as the risen one in stories involving the breaking of bread (a broader term for provisions needed to survive).

⁴ What might this say to us amidst a legacy of racial inequality and its related higher rates of poverty and incarceration among people of color?

forms of harmful behavior toward one another since Luke uses the language of sins and of debt together. Bill Kolb describes the import of forgiveness with these words: “In forgiving, we become part of a cosmic drama in which God refuses to let sin have the last word in the way the world is moving. To forgive, then, breaks a natural cycle of retribution and vengeance, of which the world has already seen too much.” Jesus models this forgiveness even on the cross. The possibility for newness, like our daily bread and forgiveness, are not reserved only for us. If we hope to receive them, we must be willing to give them in relationship.

Perhaps the danger of reverting to old destructive patterns like domination, violence, greedy hoarding or exclusion are also at the heart of our plea not to face the time of trial. This is our communal acknowledgement that we are still learning the ropes of life in the kingdom of God rather than that of Caesar or Wall Street or Pennsylvania Avenue or Fifth Avenue for that matter. Praying this prayer can help us keep our focus where it belongs: on the subversive and counter-cultural love of God which sustains us and challenges us to throw our lot in with that of others - all for the sake of love. Let us thank Jesus for this simple gift that holds the key to so much of our joy and shows us the way. Amen.