

Wesley United Methodist Church

July 28, 2019

“Lord, Teach Us to Pray.”

Luke 11:1-13

If you worked in the post office, you would probably run into all kinds of people. One postal worker says she is used to dealing with moody people. She tells about an irate customer who stormed her desk one day. “What’s the trouble?” the postal employee responded in her calmest voice. “I went out this morning,” the customer began angrily, “and when I came home I found a card saying the mailman tried to deliver a package but no one was home. I’ll have you know, my husband was in all morning! He never heard a thing!”

After apologizing, the postal employee got the woman’s parcel. “Oh good!” the woman gushed. “We’ve been waiting for this for ages!” “What is it?” the postal worker asked. The woman said with pride, “My husband’s new hearing aids.” Well, no wonder...

When we speak to one another, there are some people who won’t hear us, others who don’t listen to us. But when we speak to God, we speak to the One who hears all and listens to all.

Today I want to deal with the perfect prayer. It is, of course, The Lord’s Prayer. Most of us know it by heart. Our scripture reading from Luke for today contains one version of the prayer. Matthew 6 contains another, almost identical. The version we are accustomed to praying in church has been honed and polished over the years, but it is essentially the same prayer Jesus taught his disciples long ago. One message is not enough to do justice to the Lord’s Prayer, but perhaps for just a few moments we can capture the beauty and the significance of this ancient prayer to God.

The prayer begins with an acknowledgement of who God is. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...” God is not merely a detached observer of world affairs. God is our Father and we know of God’s power. We see it in the wind and in the storm. But does God care? That is what we want to know as we kneel in communion with God. And the answer is yes. God cares. The foundation of Christian prayer is God’s love for us. God cares about God’s children like a loving parent cares about his or her children.

When we approach God, we do so not with fear, but with respect. God is our Father, but God is also “hallowed.” The word “hallowed” means we treat God’s name with holiness. The Jewish people understood the holiness of God in a way we may not. They steadfastly resisted making images of God. They resisted even describing God because they knew that God was so high above us that no description would be adequate. They considered God’s name too holy to be spoken by human lips. If the name needed to be written, the scribes would take a bath before they wrote it and destroy the pen afterward. God is our Father, but God is also hallowed, holy. The Lord’s Prayer begins with an acknowledgment of who God is.

Then it moves to an acknowledgment of what God wants. “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

The ministry of Jesus was to proclaim the kingdom of God, the reign of God in every heart. This is God’s plan for God’s creation, that God’s love, God’s compassion, God’s holiness will permeate the heart of every person on this planet. We are obviously a long way from that, but that is the goal. That is the plan. Jesus taught us to pray for God’s kingdom every time we pray. He wants us to bring our mind into alignment with God’s that in the end we might be instruments of God’s will in the world.

Some of us slip at this point; we try to bring God’s mind into alignment with our mind, rather than vice versa. And so we push and prod God rather than opening ourselves up to God. That’s why we have such a dissatisfying prayer life. Only after we acknowledge who God is and what God wants, do we make our petitions to God. We begin not with our wants and our needs, but with an acknowledgment of God.

Our petitions are twofold. The first is physical: “Give us this day our daily bread.” We pray that God will meet our daily, physical needs. Not our wants, but our needs. If you are praying for a 60” flat-screen TV, you’re probably on the wrong track. If you’re praying for a new Hummer, good luck. However, we can legitimately pray for our needs. All our physical needs. This includes our health. And this includes our concern for those we love.

Quite obviously, God already knows our needs as well as our wants. That’s why we should not spend an excessive time with this part of our prayer. This is again where many people miss the mark in their prayer life. The prayer is all about them, their wants, their needs. But a satisfying prayer life begins with God and ends with God. We begin with our physical needs and move to our spiritual needs.

“Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

We say sins, trespasses or debts. We are praying for forgiveness of our wrongdoings and it is such an important part of this prayer. We pray because that is what Jesus did. We pray because prayer changes the one who prays. We pray because prayer lifts us above hate.

When we pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us..." we are not doing this simply because we don't want our sin to separate us from God. We pray this because spiritually we need forgiveness and we need to give forgiveness.

Then we pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil..." This may be the most confusing part of the prayer. Does God ever tempt us? No! But God allows us to be tested. We can draw that conclusion from the story of Job. Has Job been a righteous man simply and solely because God has blessed him? That is the question this book asks. What if all Job's blessings were withdrawn? Would he then curse God? And so God allowed Satan to test him.

Sometimes life tests us. Whether those tests come from Satan or not, I cannot say. Some of those tests are rough. Often they make us stronger, more confident, more content individuals when we complete them. But it is natural to pray. Like Jesus in the Garden, "if possible, please let this cup pass from me..." It is natural for us to pray, "Please don't put me to the test..."

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil..." This is one of the most important prayers that some of us will ever pray, "Deliver us from evil..." Sometimes temptations come to us. Powerful temptations. Temptations that will overwhelm us if we open the door just a crack. We need, by God's grace, to completely flee the situation. Stay out of places that are tempting to us. Sometimes that is the best advice. So we pray daily, "Deliver us from evil..."

"For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever..." These words were probably added later, but they are certainly an appropriate ending to the prayer. We begin with God and we end with God.

The Lord's Prayer is the perfect prayer for every Christian. It is a prayer that begins and ends with an acknowledgment of who God is and what God wants. It is a prayer that, if you will make it the core of your very life, will move heaven and earth.

There is an old Calvin and Hobbes cartoon in which Calvin is getting undressed for bed, and he says to Hobbes, "Any time when you don't finish the day with grass stains on your knees, you ought to seriously re-examine your priorities."

So it is with the follower of Christ. Anytime you don't finish a day without some time spent on your knees acknowledging who God is and what God wants, making your petitions known and asking his forgiveness and blessing on your life, you ought to seriously examine your priorities. In fact, let's approach God's throne right now as we pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven..."