

Psalm 85:7-13  
Luke 11:1-13

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
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## LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he was finished, one of his disciples said to him,  
"Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." *Luke 11:1*

As best I can recall the only thing that the disciples are recorded as asking Jesus for instruction on is how to pray. And the only new prayer that Jesus appears to have taught is the one we call the Lord's Prayer. It is *The Lord's Prayer*, incidentally, not because it was the prayer that Jesus used but the prayer that Jesus taught. It is a masterpiece of simplicity and directness and a perfect model for how to construct a prayer.

It begins by addressing God in praise and adoration, asking that God's will be done before anything else: "Father, hallowed [holy] be your name. Your kingdom come." That last phrase is truly the most radical and incendiary we could ever pray—may the world abandon and demolish every human enterprise, every economic practice, every subjugation of people, every political manipulation, every exercise of militancy that has no place in your kingdom on earth. Be careful what you pray for.

Only then does the prayer turn to petitions or requests. They are basic and essential.

- Give us each day our *daily bread* (literally, essential nourishment).
- And *forgive us our sins* everyone indebted to us.
- And do not bring us to the *time of trial* (that is, to a crisis from which there is no escape).

There are three versions of the Lord's prayer: this one in Luke, a longer one in Matthew, and the one the church has used throughout our generations. The very abbreviated version here in Luke's Gospel is least familiar to us, while the longer version in Matthew (which is placed at the precise center of the Sermon on the Mount) lacks the familiar closing doxology or ascription of praise that we have learned in church and home:

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

It is an ending which neatly turns the prayer back to its beginning in God, so moving from addressing God, then to us, and back to God.

In the biblical tradition that each passage is aided in its interpretation by the one next to it, Jesus tells a parable about persistence in prayer. Both the prayer and the parable have at their center a request for *bread*. A householder is awakened in the middle of the night by a neighbor begging repeatedly for bread because a guest has arrived at his home unexpectedly (the tradition of hospitality in the East required that some food be put before an arriving guest, no matter what the hour). The parable does not suggest, by the way, that God will give in to our requests in order to get some rest from us, but that God responds to our petitions when it is evident that we are sincere and persistent. God has no obligation to answer every frivolous prayer. Rather, our persistence in prayer demonstrates our urgency and faithfulness and that we take God's leadership of our lives seriously.

Whether or not the visitor was hungry was beside the point. The biblical tradition emphasized our service to one another, that life is a shared journey. The idea of the individual in ancient Israel was an untenable one. To be a person was to be part of a family, clan, tribe and nation. It was considered hideous to be an individual. Such a person had no anchor to any community.

So the Lord's Prayer is not an individual prayer. It does not petition God to give *me* my daily bread, forgive *me* my sins as I forgive, or deliver *me* from temptation. Everything asked is in the plural, from the standpoint of one who asks for other people's basic needs to be met, while also asking for oneself. This is a prayer that binds us into a common purpose. It is thus not "my" prayer but "our" prayer.

Three things, then, can be said about the movement of prayer from even such a brief prayer as this. There is a proper order to the parts of prayer: *adoration* and thanksgiving toward God; then *intercession*, that is, prayer for others (this is bound up in the "our"); and finally, *petition*, that is, prayer for ourselves (again implied in the "our").

First, we direct our prayers to God in *adoration*. It would be an odd thing, would it not, in a relationship based on love, to begin every conversation with a request for some personal want to be met, like walking in the back door after being away for a few days, and as the first words of greeting demanding, "What am I getting for supper?" No, relationships that are based on love lets that love be known, up front. "Father, hallowed (holy) is your name," that is, "Father, your name is holy, a sacred thing, to me."

Thanksgiving naturally comes next in prayer. It forms the bridge between the gifts received from the giver (God) that meet the needs of oneself and others. "Lord, thank you for . . . ." John Cheever, whose sophisticated writings about American suburbanites never give too much credence to the power of faith in their lives, nevertheless was a devout churchgoer. "I go to church," he said, "because

prayer seems to contain a certain level of gratitude and aspiration that I know no other way of expressing." George Herbert was a seventeenth-century English pastor of the little parish of Fugglestone St Peter near Salisbury, England. In one of many brilliantly creative devotional poems, he expressed his thoughts on prayer sublimely in this way:

Prayer...  
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage...  
A kind of tune...  
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,  
Heaven in ordinary man well drest.

Then comes *intercession*, petitioning God for the needs of others, both known and unknown. The prayer begins, does it not, "*Our Father...*"? Billy Sunday, the fireball Chicago White Stockings (as they were then) baseball player turned evangelist in the 1920's, had the practice of writing to the city authorities prior to a crusade, asking for a list of persons whom he might pray for. Before going to Columbus, Ohio, he wrote his customary letter. The mayor responded by sending him a copy of the city directory!

It is a source of great bonding to pray for those whom we do not know, as well as those we do. Try it the next time someone cuts you off in traffic. It smoothes the anger and thickens the threads of a common humanity, our "community." And, if you are like me, one who best functions visually, you might find it helpful to let your mind create pictures of the lives and circumstances of those for whom you would pray, even though you do not know them, like flood victims, abandoned children, their parents, the starving child with distended belly, the family huddled in a cave, escaping soldiers. God will recognize the pictures.

Finally, we pray for ourselves. Notice how our Lord's prayer touches only on the basics. I find God so much more responsive when I don't tell God *how* to solve my problems. Does this sound at all familiar? The whole point of petitionary prayer is to seek guidance and resolution for those things that we cannot solve, it is not to instruct God in the resolution of things we have not been able to fix! The whole point of faith is to let God be God—the blessed giver of surprises.

So, I offer you these closing thoughts on petitionary prayer from an unnamed source,

I asked God to take away my pride, and God said "No."  
He said it was not for him to take away, but for me to give up.  
I asked God to make my handicapped child whole, and God said "No."  
He said her spirit is whole, her body is only temporary.  
I asked God to grant me patience, and God said "No."  
He said that patience is a by-product of tribulation; patience isn't granted, it's earned.  
I asked God to give me happiness, and he said "No."

He said he gives blessings, happiness is up to me.  
I asked God to spare me pain, and God said "No."

He said suffering draws you apart from worldly cares and brings you closer to me  
and others..

I asked God to make my spirit grow, and he said "No."

He said I must grow on my own, but I will be in heaven some day because I believe.  
I asked God to help me to love others as much as he loves me.

And God said . . . "Ah, finally you have the idea."

Amen.