

Theme: Prayer

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, your son taught his friends how to pray and we have not stopped saying that prayer since then: may your kingdom come, with our help, so that your son's vision for the world will come true, through him who gave us an example of a prayer life, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I begin my sermons with a prayer. It is a prayer for you and a prayer for me. It introduces the good news I hope to convey to you. It sets the table. But primarily, prayer is a conversation with God. My opening prayer reminds me of God's graciousness that is found in the Bible passage I am using as the sermon text. I hope it reminds you too.

There is a story of a little boy standing on the banks of the Mississippi River waving and shouting at a steamboat that was going by. He was beckoning the steamboat to come to shore. A stranger came by and said, "That's foolish young man. The boat will never come ashore because of your request. The captain is too busy to notice your waving and shouting." Just then the boat turned and headed for shore. The little boy grinned and said to the stranger, "The captain is my daddy."

When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus might have been thinking, "The captain is my daddy." That is how he begins the prayer, "Daddy, you are in heaven." The word translated often as father is more appropriately translated as daddy.

Jesus responds to the disciples by teaching them a very rabbinic and a brief, easy to memorize, prayer. Jesus said, "When you pray say, 'Father, may your name be held holy, bring about your kingdom, give us each day our daily bread, forgive us our sins, as we forgive anyone who has wronged us, and do not put us to the test.'" Very simple, but it says about everything.

First of all, we find Jesus teaching what we call the Lord's Prayer in two of the four gospels, Matthew and Luke. Matthew and Luke have two different versions of the Lord's Prayer, though they basically say the same kind of things.

Then there are the translations. You would be hard pressed to find the exact same translation of the Lord's Prayer in any two English Bibles. Some of the Greek words in the Lord's Prayer are extremely difficult to translate into English.

We begin with Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. This is a typical English translation. Hallowed is an archaic word. The only other time we use a variation of it is at the end of October, Halloween. The Greek word is the word for holy. It is the same word we use when we say, "Holy, holy, holy Lord." Maybe we should just say "holy" instead of "hallowed."

The next phrase has trouble. The translators need to decide what the key word means. It either says, "give us our daily bread" or "give us our bread tomorrow." The Greek word used here has never been found in any other Greek document. So, we will likely never know what is truly meant here.

The staple food in Jesus' time was bread. The Roman legions would mutiny if they ran out of bread. Though not a staple today, what this is saying to us in our time is, "give us our meals" today or tomorrow, depending on your translation preference.

Some people say that this is existential – it applies to basic human or animal need for sustenance. Some say it is eschatological – it is looking forward to the heavenly banquet we will one day eat and that the Eucharist is a foreshadowing of that. You get to pick what may have meaning for you. And whatever you pick, at some time, your choice will change.

The next phrase is notoriously difficult to translate. The Greek words were not used in spiritual contexts. "Forgive our sins" is a pretty safe translation. The Greek word for sin is translated that way all throughout the New Testament. Trespass is an extremely bad translation.

What follows has a wide variety of translations in English Bibles. The sense is that as God forgives us we, too, should also forgive anyone who had wronged us, are indebted to us, or for any slight. This is basic to Jesus' message and the gospel. We are freely forgiven by God and so we are to forgive using the model that God does for us. This was repeated several times in last week's Vacation Bible School.

This has serious implications. If we cannot forgive others, then we are in deep do-do with God. This is also a paradox. If we are freely forgiven and we do not freely forgive, then how can God condemn us if we are freely forgiven? I don't have the answer. I guess that's why I call this a paradox. Besides, it is not up to me to judge. That's God's job.

Then there is the difficult final phrase. A literal translation would be, "And carry us not to reveal our true selves." (Translation is mine.) The word is translated as tempt, try, test, trial, and other words. The Greek word is used only one other time in Luke when Jesus is tested in the wilderness. It is a sense of asking God not to try us to reveal our true natures. I suppose this is included in the prayer, because most of us don't want to see our true selves. Talk about a self-esteem downer! But God still knows us always.

Most Christians hold this prayer very dear. We use it frequently in our liturgies. Updating the language is fraught with danger. The danger is that it becomes so familiar that we lose the sense of what it is that we are praying. We say the words by rote with no thought.

This is a powerful prayer. It deserves serious attention when we pray it. We violate this prayer in our daily lives, which makes it even more important to pay serious attention to the words. After all, we are talking to God when we pray. Who do we think we are trying to fool?

Jesus continues his teaching that they and we are to be persistent in prayer. Jesus emphasizes that persistence is useful to get what you want. In other words, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." This saying is popular because it is so often true.

To be in harmony with God, to have a sense of God's presence; to feel the assurance that God is in, around and greater than any circumstance; what comes what may, we belong to God and underneath God's everlasting arms. Prayer is not a trading post, but a line of communication.

My experience is that when I am at a loss for words to pray, that when I pray, the Holy Spirit provides the right words. There are only two things required of me: get my head out of the way and trust God. When this happens, wonderful things come in the course of the prayer. I basically leave you with these two words: trust God.

Text: **Luke 11:1–13** (NRSV)

11 He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”² He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father,^a hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.^b

³ Give us each day our daily bread.^c

⁴ And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.”^d

⁵ And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ ⁷ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

⁹ “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for^e a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit^f to those who ask him!”¹

^a Other ancient authorities read *Our Father in heaven*

^b A few ancient authorities read *Your Holy Spirit come upon us and cleanse us*. Other ancient authorities add *Your will be done, on earth as in heaven*

^c Or *our bread for tomorrow*

^d Or *us into temptation*. Other ancient authorities add *but rescue us from the evil one* (or *from evil*)

^e Other ancient authorities add *bread, will give a stone; or if your child asks for*

^f Other ancient authorities read *the Father give the Holy Spirit from heaven*

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Luke 11:1–13). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.