

Why Pray?

Luke 11:1-13

7 Pentecost 2019
July 28, 2019

From Lo-Ruhamah and Lo-Ammi, tragically symbolic children of a misbegotten, prophetic marriage - to a reluctant friend who must be nagged out of bed in order to fork over a loaf of bread, today's scriptures cover a lot of bumpy narrative and theological turf. The one thread that ties these disparate elements together is prayer. "Proseuchomai" in the language of the Bible. It literally means, **"to move toward or exchange wishes or desires."** The Lord spoke through Hosea, the Lord's desire for Israel's faithfulness. Her unfaithful response is born out, so to speak, in children whose names bespeak the brokenness of that relationship, **"not pitied,"** and **"not my people."** Prophecy and prayer are kissing cousins.

Prayer is fundamentally the language of relationship. It's hard to imagine any working relationship where the partners do not speak to one another, do not move toward one another and exchange desires with one another. As in any relationship there is both give and take. Desires are not always mutual. In any conversation one must both speak and listen. Yet, how often do we approach prayer like we were ordering lunch through the drive-through at McDonald's - then get cranky when someone puts tartar sauce on our plain fish sandwich. I confess that I, too, launch into prayers as a **"listen up, Lord, I have a big order for you to fill here and a not a lot of time."**

I am reminded that the episode recounted in today's gospel reading takes place while Jesus and his entourage are on their way to Jerusalem, a journey fraught with the portends of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. I imagine that Jesus is talking with God a lot along the way and probably wrestling like Jacob at Jabbok over conflicting desires. One such prayer episode toward the end of that journey, in the Garden of Gethsemane, is captured in countless stained glass windows and pictures. Even diluted through iconographic portrayal, it's hard to miss the gut-wrenching pathos of that prayer.

It is along the way that Jesus' disciples ask him to teach them the language of relationship with God, **"Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."** Jesus responds with what we have come to know as the Lord's Prayer - a shorter version here than what we get in Matthew's gospel, but essentially the same thing.

The prayer begins with a recognition of the relationship partner. Jesus could have begun with **"O Adonai, God above all other gods, supreme ruler of heaven and earth."** That would have been a perfectly acceptable way to address God in ancient times. In fact, it was generally assumed that any prayer began with a strong attestation of the subordinate relationship of the petitioner. The satirical Monty Python movie, **"The Meaning of Life, pt-2,"** has a prayer petitioner start in just such a fashion, **"Oh God, you are just so --- huge!"**

Jesus, however, teaches us to pray as if God were not so much the remote and impersonal benefactor, but rather a parental provider and protector. The language Jesus uses might better be translated, **"Dad, your name is holy. This is not something I can use to manipulate you or coerce your will, but, your relationship with us is close and personal and we are bold to call you, 'Father.'"**

Father, may your kingdom, a rule that supersedes the powers, politics, and principalities of this age, come. May your ordering of our lives, your kingdom, be realized among us as a

witness to the age to come. Martin Luther writes, **“To be sure, the kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us.”**

We desire your benevolence on all your people. Give us each day that which we need for life, daily bread, safe drink, freedom from danger, shelter and loving relationships. We are so often distracted by the regrets of yesterday and the worries about tomorrow. Help us to treat each day as a gift, a blessing to us that we might be a blessing to others. Again, Luther adds, **“To be sure, God provides daily bread, even to the wicked, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that God may make us aware of his gifts and enable us to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.”**

Unfortunately, we are often our own worst enemies. We ask God to set us free from the crippling consequences of our sins, those acts of defiance of God’s will, those casual and intentional hurts we inflict on others, our thoughtless neglect of other people and God’s creation, our willful pursuit of our own desires at the expense of others, our self-deprecating excuses. Forgive us, we pray. Set us free from our sins as we free those who owe us the debt of remorse over what we have suffered at their hands. Forgive us our sins, as we let go of grudges and recriminations, as we abandon vengeance and extend the hand of reconciliation even before receiving the gesture of apology. Forgive us our sins, as we dare invite a new relationship with our enemies even before all the moldering issues have been resolved. Forgive our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

Times of trial will come, times that test our faith and resolve to be faithful, times that bring us to the brink of despair. Times that threaten our security and times that pit our friendships against our values. They will come. Times that call us to stand up for what we hold as true and right will threaten our prosperity, times that render us helpless against disease and loss will threaten our sanity. We pray that we be delivered from such times, but when they come, when there is no escape nowhere to turn, help us, Father. Help us to turn to you, Oh Lord, our Father. Grant us strength in the times of trial. Restore our hope and ground our faith in your promises through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is, I believe, is the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. Luther writes in his Small Catechism on the Lord’s Prayer, **“God would encourage us to believe that he is truly our Father and we are truly his children in order that we may approach him boldly and confidently in prayer, even as beloved children approach their dear father.”** The catechism of the Catholic Church adds, **“The Lord’s Prayer is truly the summary of the whole gospel.”**

One of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott, writes in **Traveling Mercies** that there are basically two best prayers, **“help me, help me, help me”** and **“thank you, thank you, thank you.”** The Lord’s Prayer is a bit of both, but mostly a simple, honest reaching out to a God we have been given permission to approach more out of love than fear, a God who hears our cries for help and accepts our enthusiastic thanks, a God who knows what we need even better than ourselves, a God who acts with or without our asking, but invites us always to be so bold as to pray.

Michael Fick, pastor of Ebenezer Lutheran Church in Chicago, asks in a past **Christian Century** article, **“What is the point of prayer? Why should I pray?”** Another colleague of mine responds, regarding prayer, **“So then, why should we? Because Jesus told us to. Because we have no idea what mighty forces we invoke when we pray. Because prayer strengthens our relationship with God. Because praying for someone, creates a relationship with that person, even if the person has no idea you are praying for him or her. Because such relationships with God and each other changes us, for the better.”**

Pastor Flick concludes, **“When you pray, yearn for God’s reign. Ask for that which sustains you. Ask for the hard stuff, the impossible stuff. And expect to be held, challenged, blessed and changed by the Holy Spirit.”** To that, I can only add, **“amen.”**