

Lord, Teach us How to Pray

Rev. Candace McKibben, July 24, 2022

St. Stephen's Lutheran Church Genesis 18: 20-32; Psalm 138: 1-8; Colossians 2: 6-19; Luke 11: 1-13

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you in worship today. It is always nice to see you and to call to mind your important work in our community. I am grateful to your pastor and to you for affording me this opportunity to lead in worship as he and his wife celebrate their anniversary.

As some of you probably know, I am into my second year of retirement from Big Bend Hospice and am finding it a wonderful stage of life. My most recent passion, one that I share with my husband, has been to help the International Rescue Committee support the resettlement of refugees in our community. While my church had offered financial support to the IRC in 2016 when they were first getting established in Tallahassee, it has only been since I read a lovely article in the Tallahassee Democrat by Marina Brown about refugees featured in January of 2022, that we have connected in person with the refugees and the staff of IRC in their important mission. It is my prayer that every congregation in our city will find a way to be personally involved.

Our first of three families to be engaged with so far, is from Afghanistan, having escaped after the collapse of the government in August. Both my husband and I fell in love with them at first sight back in February of this year. One of the beautiful things I have observed through the months is their commitment to their faith in God. They are faithful to pray five times a day even though they are working overtime and doing all they can to get themselves established in our country. They kept the fast and prayers of Ramadan during the month of April, though Nabila is pregnant, and her husband and his brother are both working long hours. At various times during shared meals, at our home or their apartment, one of them will discretely disappear from the dinner table to offer prayer, returning with no fanfare. It is humbling to see how much they value prayer and a relationship with God, which is what our lectionary readings for today are all about.

As we heard in the gospel lesson from Luke, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. The other lectionary texts for today tell us why we can feel positive about approaching God in prayer. The lesson from Genesis reminds us of a parable Jesus told about the shepherd leaving the 99 to find the one lost. While Abraham is bartering with God for the lives of the righteous, God sees the growing count of the unrighteous in Sodom and Gomorrah, and agrees with Abraham that all lives, even evil lives matter, so he will not destroy them.

The Psalmist in our Psalm for today reminds us that God answers when we call upon him and is willing to grant us strength when we are weak. The Psalmist tells us that God is high and yet cares for the lowly, that God is a present help in trouble, and that God will make good on his purposes.

The text from Colossians advises us to beware of teachings and practices that are not of Christ in whom the fullness of God dwells. I do not read this as advice to avoid spiritual practices that we may not find spelled out specifically in scripture. Certainly, mindfulness, meditation, and centering prayer and the compassion and kindness taught in other religions or spiritual traditions, if they are helpful in your Christian walk, are not to be shunned. The advice here is to avoid teachings that are not of Christ – that is not Christ-like, not love-filled, not neighborly in nature. We are reminded that we are buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life. The author of Colossians reminds us that we are alive in God – that we are forgiven and encourages us to live life abundantly.

So, we can pray with confidence, knowing the nature of God as life-giver, listener, forgiver, and encourager. But like the disciples we wonder how to pray. I cannot imagine the disciples were looking for a specific formula. I don't believe that they were asking Jesus to tell them how often to pray, in what posture, and with which words. I believe they wanted to know what we want to know – how to deepen in our relationship with the God to whom we pray.

As Luke records this story of Jesus teaching the disciples to pray, a story that is also found in Matthew in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, it is preceded by the story of Mary sitting at Jesus' feet learning from her master. Her sister Martha is busy with the tasks that must be done and complains to Jesus about her sister's irresponsibility just sitting there at Jesus' feet. But Jesus calls Mary's focus "the good portion that will not be taken from her," saying that it is not time

wasted to focus on the nurturance of your own soul. It is followed by a parable and saying about God's goodness and eagerness to supply our needs when we ask in prayer. So, Luke sandwiches the prayer Jesus taught his disciples between lessons on the importance of relationship with God.

The prayer is certainly one that is familiar to many, even those who are not Christian. It is a Jewish prayer, in its structure and content. There are parallel phrases in this prayer and other routinely prayed Jewish prayers, including the Amidah (uhmeda), which observant Jews pray three times daily. Like their Jewish cousins, early Christians prayed this prayer Jesus taught three times a day and many Christians to this day pray the prayer whenever observing communion. Addiction recovery groups, while remaining open to God however God is understood, use the prayer Jesus taught as a standard feature of most meetings.

In part, that is because the prayer is eloquently simple and yet all encompassing. In only 36 words in Luke's telling, Jesus encourages us to pray with deep reverence for God, a yearning for God's kingdom, expectation of daily provisions, for forgiveness granted and practiced, and for protection from evil. It has been called the model prayer and I believe it is a model in several ways – a model in all that it includes, covering all the bases. And a model for us in creating our own prayer.

Think for a moment about the Lord's Prayer as a template for your own personalized prayer, crafted carefully in your own words, but following the model provided by Jesus. So, if referencing God as Father or Abba or Daddy is not the most comfortable designation for you for whatever reason, what is a title of reverence and the sort of best-case tender love you can imagine, that you might use in your personal prayer crafted after the Lord's Prayer? Is it Mother or Gentle Spirit or Loving Parent or Holy One? Spend some time thinking about the designation for God that seems most endearing to your soul. A title that to your ears, honors God, and suggests a close relationship.

How does your heart make meaning of the second phrase in the prayer template that Jesus gave to his disciples including you and me, "hallowed (Ha-ode) be your name?" Hallowed means holy which relates to the word whole or complete. We are praying that God's name be honored in the world for all that God stands for – God's goodness, righteousness, justice, and love. What phrase would you use in

your personal prayer to convey this prayer petition – may your name be hallowed? I think of Abraham Lincoln’s use of hallowed ground in the brief but poignant speech he made at Gettysburg. We are asking God to work in us to help reveal the holiness of his name, the completeness of his character which is first and foremost love as I read the scripture.

This phrase in the prayer is followed by a parallel request, “may your kingdom come.” We are praying for God’s rule in our hearts and in our world. We are asking God to help us focus on those things that matter most to God and give them priority in our lives and world. How might you pray this in your own words as you pray using the model Jesus has given us?

Both of these requests imply a sense of confidence on our part as people who pray. In a world that is weighted down with evil and sorrow, with a cruel war in Ukraine, with the pressing effects of climate change, with increasing poverty and hunger, with increasing anger and violence, with personal pain and disappointment, how do we keep hope that God’s name and reputation of love and justice will be honored or that God’s agenda or rule will be realized. We know that people despair of prayer – and say they are sick of thoughts and prayers when yet another mass shooting occurs or unretractable climate change effects insult our planet. I know I can identify with that despondency.

And perhaps that is why Jesus taught us to pray relationally, feeling our connection with the Great God of this vast Universe as did Mary who sat at Jesus’ feet. And to pray with hope, believing as he taught the disciples in the parable and teachings that follow this prayer in Luke’s gospel, that God wants to answer our prayers so keep asking, seeking, and knocking. Keep yearning for God and his ways.

According to Lutheran scholar and professor, David Lowe, in verse 8 of Luke 11, the Greek word *anaideia* (uh nigh day ah) that is often translated impudence or persistence is actually better rendered “shamelessness” and so implies a boldness that comes from familiarity. Lowe also says that asking, seeking, and knocking has been interpreted as a call to persistence but it might be more helpful, he suggests, to read Jesus’ instruction as inviting trust – ask, search, knock...expectantly, confident that you will receive that for which you ask, confident that prayer matters.

Verse 3 of Luke 11 signals a change in direction in the model prayer – only after we have acknowledged our intimate relationship with and trust in God, do we ask for our own needs. Jesus teaches us to do so with the trust that God will grant us what we need for the day – not the week, the month or year – but the day. Our daily manna. How might you translate this petition of the prayer that Jesus taught us as a model, to reflect your best understanding of its intent? Is it about contentment or perhaps basic needs for yourself or another or spiritual food that your soul needs? What words come to your heart for your personalized prayer regarding this petition?

Verse 4 of Luke 11 is another personal request of God, and it is a request for God’s forgiveness. Jesus wisely reminds us of our commitment as Christians – as “little Christs” which is the original meaning of the word Christians – to forgive others in making this important request for God to forgive us. How might you phrase this element of the model prayer in your personal prayer, to make it more compelling to you and to deepen your relationship with God. How can you confirm your personal practice of forgiving others, not holding grudges, not feeling resentment toward others, in forgiving others as you yourself want to be forgiven? What words capture your heart’s desire to forgive and to be forgiven?

The last phrase in the prayer template that Jesus gave to his disciples as Luke tells, that Jesus gave to you and to me, may be the most confusing of all. We are not surprised that God would show great integrity in hallowing his name and character, that God would grant that his Kingdom come, that God would give us our basic needs and forgive us our sins. But what a surprise that Jesus taught us to ask God to not do something so seemingly counter to God’s nature as to lead us into temptation.

You probably remember that in 2017, Pope Francis agreed with French biblical scholars who suggested that the wording of this phrase should be altered. Instead of saying, “lead us not into temptation” they suggested it say “do not let us fall into temptation.” Pope Francis explained why he felt the change might be helpful. “It is not a good translation as it stands because it speaks of a God who induces temptation. But, said the pope, I am the one who falls. It’s not God pushing me into temptation to then see how I have fallen. A father doesn’t do

that; the Pope continued. A father helps you to get up immediately. It's Satan who leads us into temptation – that's his department.”

I believe that your church decided to go with a different translation of “lead us not into temptation” saying instead what feels more congruent with God's nature for many, “Save us from the time of trial.” This petition, however it is rendered, reminds us that we are in a spiritual battle for good in this world and that God is all powerful against evil – so how can you phrase this in your personal prayer in a way that offers clarity and confidence in God's spiritual power at work within you and within the world? What words empower you?

I hope you might spend some time this week creating your personal prayer based on the model prayer of Jesus we have considered today in worship. And I hope that praying the personal prayer you create regularly over a period of time might deepen your relationship with God which I believe is what the disciples were asking when they asked Jesus to teach them to pray.

As lovely as this prayer is as found in Luke and in an expanded version in Matthew, as lovely as I imagine your personally created prayers modeled after the template Jesus gave will be, I think it is important to note that this is not the only Lord's Prayer in scripture. There is one other time when we have a recorded prayer of Jesus and it is on the night of his betrayal. Unlike the Lord's Prayer recorded in Luke and Matthew, this prayer in John 17, the high priestly prayer, is not succinct but lengthy, it is not tightly structured but rambling, a bit hard to follow. It is more emotional than the model prayer and gives us another example of the heart of Jesus in trusting God, another example of how we too might pray in these uncertain times and how critical it is that we do so.

Episcopal minister, Debi Thomas, writes: “It is important to remember that Jesus spent his last hours modeling heartfelt conversation with God. Perhaps the takeaway for us is that when all else falls away, prayer remains. Even when circumstances feel dire, prayer offers us a sturdy bridge between our hearts and God's, between our questions and God's promises, between our longings and God's grace. Prayer paves a way forward into renewed hope, strength, meaning, and possibility.”

The gospel lesson for today begins – Lord, teach us how to pray. Yes, please Lord. Teach us how to pray. Amen.