

The Treasure of Prayer
Matthew 6:7-21
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John, who was in financial difficulty, walked into a church and started to pray. "Listen God," John said. "I know I haven't been perfect but I really need to win the lottery. I don't have a lot of money. Please help me out." He left the church, a week went by, and he hadn't won the lottery, so he walked into a synagogue. "Come on, God," he said. "I really need this money. My mom needs surgery and I have bills to pay. Please let me win the lottery." He left the synagogue, a week went by, and he didn't win the lottery. So, he went to a mosque and started to pray again. "You're starting to disappoint me, God," he said. "I've prayed and prayed. If you just let me win the lottery, I'll be a better person. I don't have to win the jackpot, just enough to get me out of debt. I'll give some to charity, even. Just let me win the lottery." John thought this did it, so he got up and walked outside. And suddenly, a chorus of angels appears and sings so loud it practically bursts his eardrums...."John, you idiot. Buy a ticket."¹

That's a joke that's been bouncing around the internet for years....

It's happened again...did you notice...the Narrative Lectionary took two passages we've probably never read at the same time...and crammed them together...and, as a result, we can't look at either one of them the same way again.

¹ This joke is attributed in some sources to Buddy Hackett, though he famously said he frequently shared jokes that were of unknown origin.

The instructions on prayer...and the instructions on treasure...

I suppose, I could preach a sermon on, for lack of a better phrase, life Lottery Prayers—prayers for financial success and windfalls—but I promise you that’s not what this is about. Hopefully you know me well enough now to know that prosperity gospel is nowhere in my understanding of scripture.

But it does invite us to consider that perhaps the treasures Jesus is suggesting we pile up in heaven might have something to do with prayer...

Traditionally, we’ve used the last line of this passage to remind us to put our money where our heart is...even though that’s not what it says. It says, where you put your treasure—that’s where your heart will naturally follow. I don’t want to rob us of one of the most powerful stewardship passages out there...but when we put all of these verses together, perhaps there is something else we can find here as well...

Countless novels, short stories, and poetry remind us that earthly treasure can become moth eaten...rusty...broken...out of style...or even be stolen....hardly the stuff of the kingdom of heaven, so maybe this passage isn’t about earthly treasure at all...but then just what are treasures in heaven? Maybe if we look back at the prayer section we can find a clue...

Comparing Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer to the one we will recite together during communion today, one thing is clear....we’ve guilder the lily a bit....and as one whose job it is to pray, I can’t help noticing that this prayer is...well...short, not much more than 50

words. I'm not sure, except perhaps in liturgical prayers that I've prayed a prayer that short in a long, long time...and I've no doubt you would concur. It's worth noting that Matthew's tidy little version of the prayer is even longer than Luke's version. Did you notice that there is no "kingdom and power and glory forever" in Matthew's version? It's reduced to a footnote in most translations and as my Well colleague Andrew Foster Connors has noted before, it was probably added by the early church a little too late to be considered part of the biblical text.

The fact that there are various version of this prayers Jesus is supposedly teaching us suggests that the church has spent all it's years...early and late...trying to figure out the perfect way to pray, trying to determine the right words to use when addressing God. Recently it was announced that the Pope is working on a new translation of the prayer, to deal with that "lead us not into temptation" part. We keep tweaking the same basic message, as if finding the perfect one will make us more perfect children of God.

I find the church, and my own fretting about making prayers perfect, duly chastised by the words of Karl Barth..."As ministers we ought to speak of God." he said. "We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give glory to God." In short, he suggests give up imagining that we can find perfect language for addressing God, because it's both impossible and not the point.

Getting the point of prayer is often the most difficult part.—Because, like the language we use, the act of prayer itself comes with some theological challenges. It's hard for us when it appears that God seems to respond to some prayers and not others, and we question what

actually happens in prayer, or why a God who knows what we need before we ask, wants to hear from us anyway.

For Jesus, providing a rationale isn't necessary...it's assumed. If that's true, what my the prayer itself tell us about why prayer is important... Our Father...if we can get past the masculine language for a moment...gives us the biggest clue.

What does that opening address mean...OUR and FATHER....I want to suggest it says something about US....and about the relationship prayer leads us to.

I'm a fan of meditation...of finding a space of quiet for mental rest, for physical check-in, for quieting the noise of the demands around us...but rarely do I find meditation moving into prayer for me...because meditation is about me...and that "our father" language is a reminder that prayer isn't about listening to ourselves, or concentrating on our needs....

That opening address is the act of a community of creatures being invited into relationship with the very source of their life and being, a source that is as intimate as a father's loving embrace...a mother's protecting hand. Prayer, at its best, calls us out of overly concentrating on my wants, my desires....and directs each of us to consider...what are the needs of the community...what might the will of the one who created us in love, for love, be for us—our communities, our nations, our world.

A few verses before today's passage, Jesus has admonished his follower to forgive, to show mercy, even to love their enemies. Anybody who's

ever tried to follow that advice when it comes to loving your enemies knows it's almost impossible without constant prayer.

Anyone who's ever tried to forgive someone who has truly wronged you, hurt you or someone you love deeply...anyone who has tried that knows it takes divine intervention to make that kind of forgiveness stick.

Ask those who've spent their lives proclaiming and seeking the nonviolent path of protest against the cultural tsunamis of retribution and fear...Whatever their tradition, they'll tell you they had to call on something greater than themselves to withstand the tides of hate.

I wish I could tell you that I know exactly how prayer "works" or exactly how God "hears"...or even what exactly we think we're doing when we pray here on Sundays, or bless some food at a table, or say daily prayers.

I wish I could tell you...but who knows? All I know is that prayer...this prayer...this way of praying...has served God's children for a hundred generations. Think for a moment about all the tens of thousands of prayers that have been whispered in these walls since 1929 when this space was dedicated...

Think of the prayers lifted up by many traditions seeking relationship and guidance and community with something larger than themselves...spoken and silent words lifted up in our community and our city. Think about the prayers of "your will be done" by our sisters and brothers at Lake Street Church who a generation ago risked jail to make their church part of the sanctuary movement. Think about the prayers for "daily bread" that have echoed from tenement and shelter

in the days and years when it hasn't seemed there would ever be enough. Think about the prayers of your kingdom come when American militarism seemed to claim divine right in Central America in the '80s or just after 9/11. Imagine all the prayers for forgiveness that have risen up just in these four walls because you can't have a community called the church without forgiveness to make things new again.

I don't know exactly how prayer "works" and how exactly God "hears." But I know that seeking to pray in a way that collectively seeks relationship with God...and in a way that seeks to place our hearts beyond our individual desires has shaped a whole people, a Christ-seeking, Jesus-following people who memorize a prayer so that when the times are uncertain, the future isn't sure, they'll *remember* the God who called them together in the first place. We'll *remember* this short prayer Jesus taught us to point us in the right direction.

Maybe that's why this prayer is so short – so we won't forget it. So it can so be a part of us that when all we know is we need to pray...when we are tempted to forget what's important, it will be as close as breath; ready at hand so we can remember that God's reign of love and justice is what we ought to be praying for. Again as Andrew has put it...so that we remember "That bread for the day is enough; and that it's necessary to ask for help with forgiveness every day. So we can remember that God loves us like a Parent who will give her life for our sake."

And if that's what prayer is doing to us – shaping us into God-centered Jesus followers who believe in his revolution of love and are willing to risk ourselves to forgive when it seems foolish, to love when it seems dangerous, to risk when it seems imprudent, to live without fear when

it seems naïve. If that's what this prayer is doing to us, who really cares if we don't ever find the perfect version of that prayer?

The writer Anne Lamotte has written about a friend she and I share a woman "who comes from an abusive home who uses this prayer with what she calls "the extra space"...instead of Father, for her it is Our Fat Her...and she pictures God as a large loving African American woman...a figure she can actually pray to."

And maybe that's the treasure...the way that prayer can forge a relationship between each of us and God...between all of us and this divine mystery...a bond strong enough to hold us up in difficult days...to marshal our best efforts and perhaps even an energy we can't fully understand that can help those who face challenges, pain or loss.

As Anne Lamotte suggests, "Let's just say that prayer is a treasure-filled communication from our hearts to the great mystery, or Goodness...or Fat Her; to the animating energy of love we are sometimes bold enough to believe in; to something unimaginatively big, and not us. We could call this force Not Me, or (Not the Divine ATM the Preachers on TV) talk about. Or for convenience we could just say, 'God.'"

C.S. Lewis wrote, "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me."

I can't say for certain if he's right. But if you want to test his experience against your own, there is a way to find out. The prayer is easy to memorize...and if you can't say it today or some other day when you need it....you are part of a community...whether you've been here your whole life or just today....that will say it for you, will claim the

relationship with God it proclaims for you...until you have the words again. Perhaps that is it's greatest treasure...this little prayer...that it makes us one family of hope and love. Amen....