

Why We Pray: Need
Luke 11:5-13
Rev. Michael D. Kirby
July 14, 2019
Northminster Presbyterian Church

One hundred and fifty-four years ago, a very public speech suddenly became a very public prayer...

"Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondmen's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

In Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln mentions God and providence throughout...This sideways prayer comes just before his famous conclusion..."With malice toward none..." that part...

It's likely not something any politician could pray today....please God let war end if it is your will, but if it isn't, let us see it as your judgement against our prior wrongs...

The idea of prayer in the political arena is now fraught with tension, in part because so frequently in the political sphere, prayer is used as a weapon...to defy federal rulings against prayer in school....to cast aspersions upon one's political enemies...to further particular policy aims....

But Lincoln's prayer is raw...it's uncomfortable...in part, because it links intercession with surrender to God's will.

That's a view of God's providence that isn't very popular today...that God's will can be determined by what ultimately happens...

The Holocaust killed that kind of theology for most of us...for how could that be God's will? The whole idea of the providence of God changed in the last century....along with the theologies of God's sovereignty...

We once believed...and many certainly still do...that everything that happens is a part of God's plan....and those folks would say that Jesus'

instruction on how to pray makes it clear that prayers of intercession are really, ultimately, about surrendering to God's will...on earth as in heaven...

But, with respect, I don't think that's what Jesus is talking about...and also with respect, while we're saying what this is not about...These instructions in Matthew and Luke are not about moving us toward that one verse in Luke in isolation, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."

Jesus is not promising that God will be like Santa Claus and prayer is our continual list...

What shall be given to us, what shall we find, what shall we find behind the door that is opened....Jesus says it at the end....how much more will God grant us the presence of the Holy Spirit...

Prayer, it seems, is not about gettin' stuff as we used to say in Texas....It's about asking for, seeking, being invited into relationship...whatever comes.

Even our prayers of intercession...the prayers that come out of our deepest needs and hopes....

I want to suggest that's what Jesus' teaching about prayer in these two gospels is about...about seeking the right relationship with God through prayer...even when it's filled with our requests...

There are over 600 prayers recorded in the Bible...the Psalms are replete with them...and virtually every book of the Bible is replete with prayers that break every pattern suggested by Jesus...Are these unfaithful prayers? No...not at all, I don't think anyway...because when Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, which is remembered slightly differently as the sermon on the plain in Luke...is teaching the disciples to pray... I don't think he is telling them "this is the only appropriate way to pray," I am fairly convinced that he's teaching them...and us...the way we NEED to pray in order for prayer to have its desired impact...not on God...but on us....

Jesus sample prayer starts with remembering who God is...and honoring the majesty of the maker of the stars—the author of the atom..."our father....hallowed be thy name"....

That is an opening that is both intimate...child to parent....but cosmic as well....creature to creator, whose very name is hallowed...

Then comes the surrender...or rather the statement of purpose....may your commonwealth come here on earth....and may what happens reflect your will as perfectly as it does in that place and time that is beyond place and time...

Maybe that's not surrender...maybe...just maybe that's our promise...that we will discern and work together to be a reflection of that kingdom...that commonwealth....

SO perhaps Jesus is saying...begin your prayer by knowing who you are and who God is....and then commit to be all in on seeking a world of peace, justice, compassion and grace....

Only then do we get to the petitions....

Have you ever noticed....Give us this day our daily bread.... That's not a personal request...it's a collective request....for the collective....Just a few seconds ago, we were committing to being a part of a world that reflects God's hopes for humanity...and now we seek daily bread for us...

Any prayer that divides that us, I've come to believe, borders on the blasphemous...It's never let me have this instead of her....let our side have this so the other side can't....give US our daily bread...

Jesus invites us to pray for the good of all....for the provision for all...daily bread is what it takes to live....daily bread is what it takes to have dignity and to participate in society....daily bread doesn't require a passport or a visa or a birth certificate in English...It's what we all need to live...I don't get to ask for more for me if I'm not willing to ask for...to be prepared for everyone to get what they need...

It's an invitation to a mindset that speaks prayers in the second person plural...not me and mine....but us and our.... How might that shape how we pray for the crisis unfolding, we are told, in ten cities across the US...where the opportunities and privileges we enjoy are being protected by removing those who've asserted this is a safer place for them and their children than their homes... What does a prayer for all of us

look like when we use Jesus' prism....How does that kind of prayer convict us for our silence or unwillingness to actually seek the kingdom of God over our own comfort and privilege...I wonder how time will judge our prayers and our actions in this critical moment when daily bread is so plentiful in some places and so rare in others...

That brings home most specifically one of the purposes of Jesus' model prayer, for me anyway...this structure makes it very hard to pray for something we aren't willing to work for...not if we are remotely honest or sincere in our praying....

Perhaps it's most apropos, then, that forgiveness is the next part of Jesus' model prayer...

And just as we are invited into a commitment to seek the kingdom of God...here prayer once again invites us to commitment...forgive us God....as we have forgiven others...

You mean I don't get to hold my grudges if I want to be freed from my past wrongs? Jesus...that's hardly...well, actually, it's exactly fair...good point...we'll work on that one...

The next part is interesting....don't throw us to the wolves of our own temptations and don't leave us alone in the presence of evil...

Don't abandon your love for us, Jesus seems to be inviting us to ask...even as he knows how impossible that is...how God would never abandon us...

I wonder...is Jesus inviting us to pray that because God needs to be reminded or because we do?

When we look at my prayers and compare them with Jesus' model prayer...I'll admit it...he'd probably put me in the remedial prayer class....His prayers can be too showy...too performative....he prays a lot for what he wants....and he prays a lot for transformation of others and not enough for himself...

But, I argue in defense...the lawyer in me unable to shut up even in the presence of Jesus....

But, right there in Luke, right after your prayer...you said be persistent....keep asking...you said God wants to be compassionate....so my prayers try to seek God's compassion....

And Jesus looks right back at me...when has God not been compassionate with you? When have you actually been abandoned to your own devices?

And I think, now, maybe I'm starting to understand...Jesus' model prayer is about getting me...getting us....open to where God is at work in and through the compassion, the hope, the love, the determination, the passion of others....and inviting me to both commit myself...ourselves....to that community that seeks to reflect and perhaps be coworkers in the coming of the Kingdom of God here and now...and to offer up my deepest needs not because of a promise that each request will affirmatively happen, but because whatever comes...if I place the outcome, particularly of those things out of my control, into the arms of this loving God...then I won't be alone whatever comes....I won't have to face whatever comes alone...I'll have not just the door opening spirit...but this community of Kingdom seekers as well...

But still...can we ask for what we long for? I suppose the first question we have to ask is, is what I'm asking for what we would ask for.... Jesus' invitation into we and our father prayers as opposed to me and my father prayers is perhaps a reminder that God is viewed almost exclusively as a communal presence in the Bible...with the notable exceptions being those whose stories we seem to remember more than the collective experience of the Hebrew people in the Old Testament and the followers of Jesus and the church in the New...

So, no...I don't think this sample prayer means there are things we can't pray for...but if we truly place ourselves in the collective mindset that is at the center of this prayer, it will change what we pray for and why...

That's not to say it's going to be easy....prayer...if we take it seriously is, well, awkward... Carol Zaleski is a professor of Religion at Smith College and in an essay for the Christian Century a few years back, had this to say: "feeling foolish and artificial is as good a starting point as any for prayer. Prayer is like courtship; of course it feels foolish and artificial. It's not something you can work out inwardly and then execute outwardly. It's a series of improbable and ungainly gestures, learned by imitation, that make it possible to fall in love." She continues "Perhaps I see it this way because as a

chronic beginner at prayer, I often feel foolish and inept." I know how she feels. I have often struggled with whether my prayer life is too loose and informal...or at other times too rigid and formal...

And whether what I'm asking for is making God into Santa Claus...or my Devine facebook post....if I pray about it, I don't actually have to DO anything about it, right?

Right, Jesus?

Wrong....as we've already seen...

But I still think praying for what we need...as opposed to what we really want...is faithful...and it takes work....not to get the words right....I don't think God cares about that at all...

But it's getting me, getting us in the right frame of mind when we pray for what we need that does allow us to surrender....not to some script of life completely written centuries ago that our prayers can only alter if they are perfect...but that allows a surrender of the idea that we can only continue to be who we are if we get one particular result from prayer, from life, from today....

Maybe, then, thy will be done is not surrender to a script....but a concept...God's gracing love and compassion for ALL of humanity...maybe prayer puts us in that emotional and spiritual place where we will both work for what we believe God wants for humanity...but where we can also live in the ambiguity and the discomfort when we discover our way, our plan may not be the way things happen....

Either...

So...do prayers like this change outcomes, or just change us?

I don't think we can honestly know the answer to that question...because changing us, necessarily changes the outcome...And I don't think we fully understand the power of seeking the welfare of another...whether it is for their health, their peace of mind, their oppression or their suffering... Yes, in praying we commit to work for it...but in praying, I wonder too, if we are a part of channeling something intangible...call it hope...call it the power of positive thinking....call it a miracle...that can sometimes make a difference in

someone else's life. I'll admit that's a mystery for me...and one I know I don't have to know to continue to pray for others when I need to....

And so let us continue to pray out of our need....out of our communal needs, out of the world's needs, out of the needs of those who suffer...and if we do so using the way Jesus suggests we need to pray....I'm fairly certain that the rest of Jesus' life and ministry will show us how to live out the mindset we commit to in prayer....the common good we commit to in his prayer...the way of engaging the world and our own wants in his prayer....

And with apologies to Mr. Lincoln....

Let our lives be our prayer enacted....with malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right...let us strive on to finish the work we are in...to bind up the world's wounds, to care for those who have born the scars of life's battles and for those they have left behind, and to do all which may achieve and cherish Shalom...a just and lasting peace among ourselves and among all the peoples of the earth....

May God make it so...through us...in us...or even despite us...

Amen.