

Luke 11:1-13

Jesus 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." He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial."

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; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' 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.' 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.

"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. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 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 to those who ask him!"

What can I say about the Lord's Prayer? That was my dilemma on Monday when I 1st looked at today's Gospel. If there's any text that approaches universal knowledge it's the Lord's Prayer. When I was a child, through 8th grade I think, we said it daily in class in public school. When the courts forbade it I was part of a group at my church that prayed daily before school. That lasted less than 1 year.

The prayer that we have in the BCP, in either version, differs from the prayer in Luke or Matthew so today we'll look at Luke and expect that it will inform the prayer that we use, perhaps daily or more often, in our own prayer lives.

I'll start with the story which follows the prayer because it helps set me up for a new look at the Lord's Prayer. There is a current argument that words mean what words mean so that, for instance, the Constitution means only what it meant in the 18th century and furthermore, that the meaning of these words is obviously clear to us today. That's a controversial statement and is in opposition to the belief that the Constitution is a living document.

One of the problems with interpreting an old document like the Constitution, or an ancient document like the Greek New Testament, is that much that we assume is true and obvious was neither true nor obvious then. For instance, we are practically universal in believing that the ideal is to sleep 8 uninterrupted hours. Many of us may not attain that goal but we assume that this is the ideal and reflects the way our bodies were designed. However, recent studies have shown that prior to the relatively recent era, when artificial light became nearly universal, people did not

sleep for 8 hours straight! If you email me I'll be glad to share with you the studies that show this¹. Before artificial light, which we take for granted, people spent much more time in bed but not asleep. Historical research shows us that sleepers went through several different periods of sleep, quiet wakefulness compared to meditation, and deep dreaming. We find references to the first sleep and then a period of some wakefulness in which we would eat, socialize, or read. This period lasted for an hour or more. It is likely that the man who knocks on his neighbor's door at midnight is not disturbing someone who is dead asleep. He arrives at a time, midnight, when the 1st sleep would be over and the neighbor would be awake. Luke would've assumed that we realized this. The man, who needs the bread to satisfy the needs of hospitality to avoid shame, knew that his neighbor was awake and could grant his request. If you'll accept this then the action is not so problematic. We will return to this story later but now we'll move on to the Lord's Prayer. My hope in talking about sleep and the 1st century is to alert you that we may not know all that we assume we know unless we can immerse ourselves in the ancient culture.

Keeping in mind that the world of Jesus and that of the early church was different from ours in more ways than sleeping patterns, let's look at the prayer. Scholars believe that we don't have one prayer but six short ones. The first is: Father, hallowed be your name. This is similar to the modern Hebrew prayer, *baruch attah adonay elohenu melek ha'olam*, בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, Blessed are you, O Lord, king of the universe.

While I don't know how long Judaism has been using this prayer I do know from studying Hebrew and Aramaic texts contemporary with the NT that a form of it is ancient. This blessing introduces a short petition and is, for our purposes, equivalent to father, hallowed be your name. You may also have heard that the Lord's Prayer is unique because Jesus calls God Father. While this does not occur in Hebrew and Aramaic it is common in 1st century Hellenistic Judaism, in other words, the diasporic Jews who would've heard the Gospel outside of Palestine and whose first language was Greek. They called God, Father.

The next prayer, Your Kingdom Come is one we make so often that it has lost power over us. We are praying for the end of the world and not for an indefinite future of prosperity for us and our children. This is a radical statement that we yank out of its Lucan context and believe somehow, contrary to the entirety of the New Testament, that we're really praying for a good life. We are praying for this world to end and God's kingdom to begin. Remember please that the only promise of the NT is that we will be treated no worse than our savior, and they crucified him!

Give us each day our daily bread is likewise confusing. The confusion stems from the use of a word which only occurs twice in the New Testament. The word, translated daily as in daily bread², actually means tomorrow! The prayer is actually asking God to be certain that we have sustenance tomorrow! Since the word only occurs twice in the NT and only in this context, early interpreters translated it daily because elsewhere Jesus tells us that we are not to be anxious about tomorrow³. It means tomorrow. I'm not advocating that we alter the prayer, just pointing out the differences between our time and the 1st century. Another difference of course is that

¹ William Holladay, "Indications of Segmented Sleep in the Bible," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 69/2 (2007) 215-221; A Roger Ekrich, "Sleep We Have Lost: Pre-Industrial Slumber in the British Isles," *American Historical Review* 106 (2001) 343-385; *ibid*, *At Day's Close, Night in Times Past* (NY/London: Norton, 2005)

² Epiusios, ἐπιούσιος

³ Matt 6:34

they were praying literally for bread whereas we pray for much else that they could not have imagined.

The next petition is that our sins be forgiven. The word here is the common word for sin and means falling short of the mark.⁴

The next and separate prayer is *for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us*. There are several changes here between this prayer and the one we know well. The primary difference is the preposition “for”! Does the Lord’s Prayer really want to say that forgiveness from God is dependent upon our ability to forgive others? Do I have any hope that God only forgives me *as* I have forgiven others? If so I have no reasonable expectation for salvation. I hope not and I doubt it. God does not expect me to be God. However we may have confidence in God’s willingness to forgive us because from time to time we’ve been able to forgive others. But the word in the first petition translated *trespasses* in our popular prayer is different from the word for sin that was used in Luke, which is to fall short of the mark. The word used in the second petition means debts⁵. So the Presbyterians have the translation right, forgive us as we forgive our *debtors*! The point of the two prayers is that if we, who cannot forgive perfectly, can nevertheless forgive those who owe us, then how much more will God forgive us who have fallen short of the mark. Or as the NRSV more accurately translates in today’s Gospel:

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

In Luke there is no parallelism forgive us our *sins* (trespasses/debts) as we forgive those who sin/trespass (sin or debtors) against us.

Finally we are to pray, and do not bring us to the time of trial. Does God really test us? Perhaps. If, as I believe, the New Testament is apocalyptic then clearly God judges us. But the real meaning is probably less harsh. We are asking for God to be with us when we face temptation.

My hope is that this will lead you to rethink a prayer you may say reflexively and realize that it is really a series of short prayers, as would’ve been common in the time of Jesus.

Now to return to the need for bread in the story which follows the Lord’s Prayer. There is another problem due to a rare Greek word. The word translated in our text as persistence is in fact the Greek word for shameless⁶! Remember as I’ve said at other times, all translations are lies. In this text we need to realize that sleep is not what we think it is. We also have seen that the word translated daily occurs only twice in the NT and probably means tomorrow and now the word translated persistence means shameless! Translation frequently means interpretation and the interpreters, regardless of version, have not wanted to compare God to someone who is shameless and therefore didn’t want to say that the man needing bread shamed his neighbor into providing it! In actuality the man seeking the bread is trying to avoid dishonor, shame, because he has nothing to provide his guests. The frequent translation of persistent neighbor or importunate neighbor rather than shameless neighbor, seems to imply that our prayers are answered only to the degree that we persist in them and ultimately break down God by wearying him with our frequent petitions. This is not God as I understand him. Our prayers are not answered because they’re frequent, correctly phrased or because we negotiate with God. The

⁴ Hamartia, ἁμαρτία

⁵ Opheilo, ὀφείλω

⁶ Anaideia, ἀναιδεια

point of the parable is that God will as certainly answer our prayers just as one neighbor will rescue another.

Of course you and I are constantly asking God for things that he hasn't delivered on. So what's the point of prayer? If persistence won't insure that it is granted, if frequent attendance at church won't insure that it is granted then what's the point? The Lord's Prayer can focus us by reminding us that for Jesus, prayer as he taught his disciples should conform to six things. There may be more things that he would include, but this pericope knows only six:

1. The Father's Name is to be blessed.
2. We pray that God's kingdom come soon.
3. We ask that we need not be anxious about tomorrow.
4. We ask God to forgive our shortcomings and sins.
5. We promise that we will forgive others.
6. We ask for support in the face of temptation.

Nowhere in the entire New Testament does God promise us more than this. Indeed as I said earlier in this sermon; the only promise of the NT is that we will not be treated worse than our savior! And they crucified him.

Is this good news? It is only if we define our lives as gaining meaning by being faithful. If we define our lives by any other standard then there may be advantages to coming to church because it helps you meet good people; it strengthens marriages; it provides structure and ethical instruction for adults and children; it enables us to do good charitable things and probably many other things. But those things accrue to anyone who leads a disciplined and principled life. Faith is different and guarantees none of these things. It only promises us that our lives will have meaning and we will be leading the lives God created us to lead. The church will embrace you for whatever reason you attend and support it but the riches of a spiritual life await those who realize that the promises of faith may put us in conflict with the goals of society. I'm stuck in this dilemma and I share it with everyone but I know that any meaning my life has occurs when I conform to the six parts of the Lord's Prayer.