

Sermon Proper 12
Year C

[RCL] Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19); Luke 11: 1-13

Lord, teach us how to pray.

*“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.”*

This is the Lord’s Prayer as found in the gospel of Luke.

Prayer. What can one find to say about prayer in an environment where it can be used as a cover for hypocrisy, an easy mantra to fool the vulnerable? “Our thoughts and prayers are with you,” politicians say to bereaved parents whose children were gunned down because these same politicians failed to do what is just and good. Even the ancients understood that empty prayers meant nothing. There was a saying in ancient Greece: “Together with Athena, move your own hands also.” Do something, don’t just pray!

The disciples had witnessed that whenever their teacher, the one they called “Master,” had exhausted himself doing good, he would withdraw from the crowd in order to pray. And they had seen the results of those prayers in his life-transforming deeds and in his unfathomable peace. “Lord, teach us how to pray!” They too wanted that peace and strength, the utter assurance that Jesus had in doing the will of his Father. “Lord, teach us how to pray.”

The simple and profound words that were the response to that request have become known as “The Lord’s Prayer.” Throughout the centuries countless faithful have uttered them together, are uttering them still. They are words that rise up and blend into an endless prayer of praise, of supplication, of doxology.

Jesus showed them that first they must know whom they are addressing. The Greek word for prayer used in the gospels means “a wish, a request toward” someone. Luke’s version is pared down, simpler than the prayer found in Matthew’s gospel. The familiar one has been developed from Matthew’s version, and the modern version has some points that were made by ancient authorities. Yet, the core is the same.

“Our Father...” There are people in our world who have mixed emotions about this word because they had the terrible misfortune of living with a bad father. And many of us were blessed

with loving and caring fathers and we have no difficulty in identifying the Creator with the word Father. God, who is father and mother, understands.

“Hallowed be your name.” We are addressing the Holy of Holies, the all-sacred one. We are reminded immediately by Jesus that when we address God we are in the presence of holiness.

“Your kingdom come.” Jesus’ favorite image: the kingdom of God where justice prevails, where love conquers. The kingdom of God where everyone is of equal value in God’s sight. May it come to us also, he teaches us to pray.

“Your will be done.” We long for the kingdom where God’s will is done. Putting it on a marble pedestal, in the public arena, will not save us. All that is for show. God is not mocked. Jesus warned us severely about praying in order to show others how pious we are. True prayer is the private communion between us and God. Even when we pray in unison, in church, we are connecting to God and to each other.

This then is the first portion of prayer: the acknowledgment of God as Father/Mother, as Holy, where God’s rule of love and justice are natural and at home.

The second part is a simple request for what sustains life. Bread was the essence of nourishment in the ancient world. Having bread meant one was not hungry. Not having bread meant starvation. “Give us the necessities for living; all else is superfluous.”

“And forgive us our sins.” The second request that concerns us is the need to forgive. In all the gospels there is an expansion of this need for forgiveness and it helps to seek, find, and read all the references. The plea to be forgiven is followed by the most surprising element of this prayer:

“ . . . for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.” That God’s forgiveness is dependent on *our* ability and willingness to forgive is unexpected. Without the grace to forgive our fellow human beings, we would not recognize, or even accept, God’s forgiveness of our own sins. “Those who are indebted to us,” may also be taken literally. In the ancient world, as in our own mean times, being indebted financially was very serious. Many times it meant life or death. Jesus knew that Mammon was a powerful idol, that those who cannot forgive debts because they worship money cannot possibly be forgiven by God first. Think of the people who have lost their jobs because the CEO wanted more money than he could spend in ten lifetimes.

“Do not bring us to the time of trial.” Trials are frequent and no one is spared. We pray to be shielded from trials, but when they do come, they must be faced. So in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, “Let this cup pass from me,” but he was not spared and he faced his death, convinced of the will of his Father.

This then is the profound and simple prayer that binds us together as we worship. This is the prayer that forms the basis for all our prayers. We are assured by Jesus that we are being heard. Jesus adds more urgency through stories of people known to his hearers, like the persistent child to a father. A father responds to the child’s plea, he tells us. He encourages us to be persistent. God’s will for us is good.

In the midst of despair over the conditions of terror and harm and killing in our world, it is good to remember that millions of the faithful are praying every minute of the day: “Your kingdom come, your will be done.”

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