

Priorities & Persistence

Pater Noster, Our Father, the Lord's Prayer... whatever we may call these few verses that appear in the Gospels according to Luke and to Matthew, they are some of, if not the, best known, most remembered words of Jesus and indeed of the whole Bible. We say them sometimes without much thinking; we take them for granted. Preachers rarely use them as the basis of sermons precisely because they are so well-known. What can we possibly say about these words that is new and edifying? Nevertheless, it is important to preach from this famous prayer precisely because it is so well-known and because we do often say it by rote without truly praying the prayer. I won't promise that everything I say today is new. In fact, I know that at least some of you have heard at least some of this material from me before. But I hope that what I have to say will bring some new or renewed meaning to our prayers together in the future.

I am indebted in the basic structure of my remarks to Anglican priest and professor, L. Gregory Bloomquist, who says that Jesus taught his disciples two basic things about prayer that day – what their priorities should be in prayer and the importance of persistence in prayer. I'm also grateful to three other authors, Bishop N.T. Wright, the late Glen Stassen and Kenneth Bailey for their insights. Let's think first about the priorities that Jesus taught his disciples they should pursue in prayer.

First there is the address of the prayer: Father. I suspect all of us have heard before just how radical Jesus' use of this term for Almighty God must have seemed to his hearers. While it's true that there are a good number of passages in the Old Testament which point to God as the loving Father of humankind, it's also true that the standard form of address to God in Jewish prayers was much more lofty than Jesus' intimate "Abba." By telling his disciples to begin their prayers with this tender word, Jesus is teaching them about the kind of relationship they are to have with God, a relationship of complete love and trust, just as a child loves and trusts the parent. This relationship with God was a priority for Jesus. Luke demonstrates this in the literary craft of the Gospel. The first words and the last words of Jesus in this Gospel are about the Father, from "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" to "I am sending upon you what my Father promised." To pray as Jesus would have us pray, we must put a loving relationship with our Loving God first and foremost. To use the language of last week's lesson and sermon, we must do the one needful thing.

"...hallowed be thy name." Literally, we are praying for God to make God's name holy. Seems a little silly, doesn't it. Isn't God's name holy by definition? Remember, in the ancient world, including the time of Jesus, a name was not just a word but something revelatory of the person to whom it was attached. We may not think much about this these days, but we are still careful to give our children names that we think will reflect well on them in years to come. Nobody names their kid Adolf or Benedict or Judas these days, yet in their time these names were quite popular. It only took one person of abominable character to remove those names from the realm of use. In his book, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Kenneth E. Bailey reminds us that God's people can and have brought shame on the name of God by identifying themselves with God and then acting in very un-God-like ways. We certainly all know people who have a terrible opinion of Christians because of the acts of some who self-identify as followers of Jesus. And don't the actions of the late Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church make it hard to want to proclaim ourselves as Baptists? But you don't have to be as notorious as Fred Phelps to cause God's name

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to be dishonored. When we pray for God to hallow God's holy name, we are also praying that God keep us from causing that name to be dishonored.

One of the great paradoxes of our faith is our understanding that the Kingdom of God is both here and not-yet. On the one hand, Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God, the state of being in which God's will is followed, is within us, among us, wherever he is present. On the other hand, he taught us to continue to pray for the fulfillment of the Kingdom — that God's will should be done in the realm of humankind just as it is done in the realm of God. As Christians, we recognize the beginning of God's Kingdom on earth, the Beloved Community, in the Incarnation and in the Resurrection. But we cannot help but be aware that the redeeming work of God has not yet played out in full. Death and sin are all around us. "The Creation groans," as Paul wrote to the Romans, as do we as we wait for the process of our adoption to be completed. When we consider the victims of human evil or of the natural forces still not tamed in the ongoing process of creation, we pray, "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done," and we do our best by following the teachings of Jesus to live in a way that shows we are already part of the Kingdom, performing the will of God in our lives. To say this prayer is to make God's vision for the world a priority in our own lives.

I mentioned my indebtedness to Gregory Bloomquist for his general categories of priorities and persistence and I'm also impressed with how he expresses verses 3 & 4 as prayers that free us from worries about the present, the past and the future, although, again, I'm going to expand on and deviate from what Bloomquist wrote. "Give us each day our daily bread," is a very clear prayer for God to grant us what we need right now, in the present. We're not to get hung up on our desires for materialistic things but simply to ask God for what we truly need each day. This is not the same for asking for everything we want. The so-called "Gospel of Prosperity" that is still being preached around the world these days is a dangerous perversion of the idea that God will supply our daily needs. We are to ask God to supply our daily bread, that which is necessary for our lives, both physical and spiritual. And let's not forget that the prayer is for God to supply "our" daily bread, not "my daily bread." When we pray as Jesus taught us, we are praying for the needs of the whole community. There are no stories of Jesus eating alone. The fellowship of the table is important in the Gospel. Sharing the precious resources of life is a mark of the love which comes from relationship with Abba God. And let us also remember that Jesus himself is the Bread of Life. To pray for our daily bread is also to pray for our community to have contact with the Spirit of Christ on a daily basis. Once again, the priority is the holy relationship, both with God and with each other.

To pray, "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us," is to be released from anxiety over the past. I try to say as much as possible in my preaching that God loves us, that I think that is the message most needed in our world. A close corollary is that God forgives us. We need not carry the guilt and stress of bad decisions, mistakes, or outright rebellion. First John is a letter to the churches that is all about God's love for us and one of the best known verses in that letter is chapter one, verse nine: "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins." Jesus brought the Good News of release to the captives – forgiveness for those who are held captive by their past. Jesus also reminded his disciples again and again through teaching and stories that forgiveness was a grace that must be passed on. I like what that fine Baptist scholar Alan Culpepper says in his commentary on this passage: "One who will not

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forgive cannot receive forgiveness; mercy flows through the same channel, whether being given or received.” Forgiveness, both received and extended, must be a priority in our prayer and in our lives.

Jesus’ prayer also teaches us how to be released from our anxiety about the future. To pray, “do not bring us to the time of trial,” is to confess that we often look to the future with some dread. To admit to a fear, to look it in the face and call it by name, is to begin to take power over it. To then offer it up to God is a path to further release. There are things in our lives that we are afraid of, each and every one of us. By asking God to take from us a future of trial, we acknowledge that we are, for all of our vaunted independence, truly dependent on God for all of our lives. When we pray this prayer together, we still say the words most of us were taught as children from the old King James Version of the Bible: “Lead us not into temptation...” I find it easy to understand the NRSV idea of God bringing us to the time of trial. The Bible gives us plenty of stories of God putting people to the test – Job, for example, or Abraham with the sacrifice of Isaac. I can pray with great fervency to not be put to those sorts of tests. But the idea of God leading us into temptations has never made much sense to me. One of the great New Testament scholars of the last century, Joachim Jeremias, did a great deal of work on the Aramaic underlying the existing Greek manuscripts of this prayer, some of which is quoted in Bailey’s book. Jeremias points out that “do not cause us to go into temptation” in Aramaic can also be translated, “do not permit us to go into temptation.” In other words, “Dear God, keep me from doing anything stupid today.” Now, I know that prayer. It’s one I often say myself. And the picture of our loving Abba gently steering us away from toddling up to the hot surface and burning our chubby little hands makes good sense to me. I remember my Dad doing just that for me – or at least I remember being told about it. “God, keep us away from things that draw us away from you.” You might say that the prayer ends as it begins, with a child’s understanding that we need our Loving Creator to protect us from the dangers that still lurk in God’s unfinished world.

With this simple prayer, Jesus taught his disciples what their priorities in prayer should be. He then moves to a story and teaching about the importance of persistence in prayer. Now what can that mean? Is Jesus telling us to simply batter the gates of heaven with our petitions, no matter what they may be, until God gives in? Even the grammar of Luke’s Greek in verse nine might lead us to this conclusion. In the Greek, the words “ask,” “search,” and “knock” are in a tense that implies ongoing action – “keep on asking,” “keep on searching,” “keep on knocking.” It’s easy for me to understand the importance of persistence in petition. When I was a young theatre administrator at Actors Theatre of Louisville, my boss prepared me for a meeting with the head of the theatre, Producing Artistic Director Jon Jory. “Listen,” she said, “Jon’s going to ask you to pursue a bunch of different ideas. Write them down but don’t do anything about them. If he mentions any of them again next time, then go to work. That’s how you know what’s really important to him.” But I don’t think what Jesus is teaching is as simple as getting the boss to repeat himself. Jesus did not teach persistence for its own sake. It’s worth noting, I think, that in Jesus’ story, the man seeking bread from his friend is not seeking it on his own behalf but because he needs to feed a late-traveling guest. Our persistent petitions to the Father should not just be on our own behalf, but on behalf of our families, our neighbors, our community.

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“Keep on asking, and it will be given you; keep on searching, and you will find; keep on knocking, 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.” Jesus assures his disciples, then and now, that persistence in prayer has results. Please notice that he does not promise it will have exactly the results we expect. Jesus, after all, knew better. Not even Jesus’ own prayers were always fulfilled in exactly the way we might choose. Consider his long night of prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, when he prayed for the cup of suffering to pass from him, prayed so long and so hard that Luke tells us in his anguish, “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.” If we expect our most persistent prayers to be answered in exactly the way we expect, then we forget Jesus’ words from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” If we expect our most persistent prayers to be answered in exactly the way we expect, then we forget the example of the Apostle Paul: “to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”” We will not always get exactly what we think we should. God will not give us a snake instead of a fish or a scorpion instead of an egg, for God is our loving parent, who loves us more and better than even the best earthly parent. Jesus tells us the ultimate result of our persistence in prayer: “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!”

Here is where we get to the key to the importance of persistent prayer. When we continually seek a relationship with Abba God in prayer, the result is that the Holy Spirit becomes more and more manifest in our lives. In turn, the Spirit’s influence begins to affect our prayers. Remember Paul’s words to the Romans: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” One of the highlights of my theatrical career is a production I directed for the A.D. Players in Houston in the mid-1990s, “Shadowlands” by William Nicholson. The play, which was first a British TV movie and later a Hollywood feature, tells the story of the famed Christian author C.S. Lewis and his late life, tragically short marriage to American Joy Davidman, who died of cancer. In the play, as Joy rallies during her illness, a friend says to Lewis, “God hears your prayer, doesn’t he? We hear Joy’s getting better.” Lewis responds, “That’s not why I pray, Harry. 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.” Rev. Charles Reeb makes the explicit connection between the lesson of Nicholson’s play and the Gospel: “When we ask long enough, seek hard enough, knock loud enough, and pray persistently enough, something happens on the inside of us. The discipline of prayer begins to awaken us to the Holy Spirit inside of us, and our motives and desires begin to change. It is like the persistence of our praying becomes the axe that breaks up the frozen numbness of our souls. Then the power and wisdom of God break in and we begin to be formed by the will of God.” Once again, Jesus’ model of prayer points us towards a vital, living, freeing relationship with relationship with God. If we consistently seek the face of God, if we hunger and thirst for God’s presence in our lives, we will discover that no burden is too heavy, that no night is too dark, that God’s love enables us to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. It is why Christians for centuries have taken refuge in this prayer by the medieval saint, Thomas à Kempis: “Grant me, O most loving Lord, to rest in thee above all creatures, ... above all riches

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and art, above all fame and praise, above all sweetness and comfort, above all hope and promise, above all favors and gifts that thou canst give and impart to us, ... above all things visible and invisible, and above all that thou art not, O my God. It is too small and unsatisfying, whatsoever thou bestowest, whilst thou art not seen and not fully obtained. For surely my heart cannot truly rest, nor be entirely contented, unless it rest in thee.”

What are our priorities in prayer? Are they the same as Jesus taught? How persistent are we in seeking the face of God? Is that just a Sunday morning thing for us? The familiar words of the “Our Father” may and should bring us comfort but we must also hear in them the challenge of Jesus. May God add to the speaking, the hearing and the singing of God’s Word. Amen.