

THE LORD'S PRAYER: A PATTERN FOR LIFE

I. "OUR FATHER, WHO ART IN HEAVEN" MARCH 8, 2020

The Witness of the Scripture:

The Gospel: Matthew 6:5-13

The Sermon:

You may be wondering,

- Why a sermon series on the Lord's Prayer?
- Why preach on something we all know by heart?

Ah, but something weird can happen with us: we can lose track of the meaning when we know it too well. Rolling off our tongue, it can become rote. We start with "Our Father" and just keep going until we reach the end.

In the early Church, Lent was a time of instruction. During Lent those seeking the faith learned what it was to be a Christian. They studied, they thought, and then on the Saturday before Easter Sunday, participating in the all night vigil. As Easter Sunday dawned, they came into the church community.

So I have come to see Lent as a learning time, a time to take up some aspect of the Christian Faith and ask: "Now, what does this mean?"

II.

And what candidate could be more obvious than the Lord's Prayer? This prayer of Jesus is known worldwide, spoken in more languages than I can name. I began to wonder,

- What power does this prayer have?
- How can it serve as a pattern for life?

Prayer can be confusing. Remember the disciples said to Jesus: "Lord, teach us to pray." It's an honest request. For sure, prayer is central and basic . . . but what it is and how it works, is anything but clear.

I suspect the general population has the impression that prayer has to do with asking God to do something we want to happen.

Just for fun, last week I wandered through a bookstore to "test these waters." I found titles like "Winning Through Prayer," "How to Make Prayer Work for You," "Prayer Can Save Your Marriage," and here's one: "You can Lose Weight Through Prayer." (I considered buying it, but I suspected it might say "eat less cookies." And who wants to hear that?)

I'm sure those authors wrote to be helpful, but it left me with the impression that God is the operator of a celestial supermarket or a heavenly Costco where you can go in and pick out what you want from a broad selection of goodies.

What is Jesus doing in this passage? Is it possible Jesus wants to move us beyond the supermarket way of relating to God? Could it be that Jesus is calling for something fuller, more natural, deeply authentic, genuine . . . something more like a friendship with God?

In this passage, I believe Jesus is pushing us toward more openness, more honesty, something “relational,” bring us home. It’s very much like the last verse of a hymn I love, “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need.”

The sure provision of my God attend me all my days;
O may Your House be my abode, and all my works be praise.
There I would find a settled rest, while others go and come;
No more a stranger, or a guest, but like a child at home.

III.

Prayer as a pattern for living? One book describes prayer as “The Practice of the Presence of God.” I think that means:

- Carrying God’s presence into our times of lost tempers, deep doubts, tight times;
- Bringing God's presence into our cynicism and childishness;
- Inviting God into the good, the bad, and ugly of our lives.

When Jesus says, “Your Father already knows your needs before you ask,” Jesus is not suggesting we should stop asking. Rather, Jesus is saying God has already - from God’s side of the relationship - invited us into that close communion in which we are deeply known.

So, it seems to me, the goal of prayer, in the broadest sense of the word, is not just getting the answers we want, nor even making sure we have adequately expressed our gratitude. It is discovering ourselves related, understood, known, and feeling at home with the God who calls us into life.

IV.

Now, in all of this, I wonder if a little pronoun has slipped by you. The prayer begins with “Our Father” not “my Father.”

An important pronoun. It alerts us to the notion this is a prayer of the community. This is “our” Father – not just my own personal expression of God, not even the god I have invented in my mind, but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

William Willimon has written,

We say ‘our’ because of the astounding recognition that this God, the one who created the universe and flung the planets into their courses, the great God of heaven and earth, has willed to become our God. Before we reached out to God, God reached out to us, promised to be our God, promised to make us God's people.

Thus, not because of who we are or what we have done, but rather because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, we are privileged to say ‘Our Father.’

Even when we don't know how to pray, don't know what to say, find ourselves confused or lost or in the wilderness, we can be strengthened with the fact that we have been claimed by the One who created us.

Every time we pray, the "our" says we do not pray alone, that we are not stuck holding the bag by ourselves, that we are part of a community who through the ages have prayed and supported us.

I've lost who said this, but I remember writing down:

“You are never alone in church. Every time we gather to pray, the saints pray with us, as if leaning down from the ramparts of heaven to join their voices with ours in the praise of God, as if to cheer us on in our current struggles to be faithful.”

Well, we have come full circle. We are right back to the response following the Prayer of Confession:

Take, O take me as I am;
Summon out what I shall be;
Set Your seal upon my heart and live in me.

