

Sermon – Proper 12 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

Luke 11: 1-13

Jesus spent his three years of documented ministry teaching his disciples primarily a new way to live in relationship to God and each other. Jesus appeared often to be ‘on-the-go’ moving from place to place, teaching, healing and meeting people. He was nearly always in the company of his disciples and the hordes of followers and detractors that moved around the region with him.

One of the ways Jesus was able to deal with this circumstance was that he slipped away for times of quiet solitude and prayer with God, his Father. It was a necessary antidote to the crushing expectations heaped upon him by the throngs that followed him and longed for his attention to their specific needs.

Jesus mostly found solace in the early hours of the morning when it was quiet. The effect of these quiet times of prayer with God must have been transformative, for one of his disciples asked how he might pray. Ever since people have had the same request. Lord, teach us how to pray!

Prayer is such an important part of our spiritual lives yet for a lot of people prayer does not come easily. For some they become mute before God and for others they become verbose. In my days as a hospital chaplain, one of my main roles was to be the person of prayer for patients and their families who often yearned for God’s mercy but didn’t feel they could express themselves before God. Praying for me was part of my ministry of presence to patients and families, helping to articulate before God their pain and suffering, and for some their thankfulness.

Jesus gave to the disciple, and to us, a simple prayer. The Lord’s Prayer, as this prayer became known has been the foundation of Christian prayer ever since. The prayer was largely derived from Jewish prayer forms used in the synagogues and is comprised of three main sections. The first is an acknowledgement of God. The second are petitions and the third is a request.

There is no getting around that Jesus saw God as his father because this was how the Jewish people experienced God from scripture. The most common form of address to God in the synagogue was “Our Father, Our King.” Even though scripture confirms that God is neither male nor female, Jesus designation of God as Father has been carried on down through the ages. Jesus therefore does not offer a new idea of God in this prayer but rather builds off the familiar and gives reverence to God as creator and Lord of all.

Thy kingdom come invokes for us the concept that the perfect kingdom of God is a work in progress. God’s kingdom is based on love and justice and is to be found both deep within our own souls, as we seek to grow as believers, and in the eschatological hope of a world where perfect love and justice will prevail over all else.

The second part of the Lord's Prayer gives voice to our on relationship with God and our need for provisions and forgiveness. When the freed Israelites first starting to make their way north out of slavery they grumbled and complained that God was leading them toward destruction rather than to the Promised Land. They complained they needed water and food and God heard them and provided it for them. We, like them are dependent on God for our daily needs. With this acknowledgment should come our desire to give back some of what we have been given for the benefit of God's ministry in the world.

Forgiveness is a blessing bestowed on us by God through Jesus Christ. Nothing we can do is so bad that God will not continue to love us. But often we turn away from God by judging ourselves to be unworthy of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a major theme in Luke's writings because for many, true forgiveness is extraordinarily difficult. We can often bury our pain and anger in an effort to move on with our lives, however the effects of not addressing that hurt and anger with forgiveness is corrosion of our souls.

In my pastoral work I have talked with many people about forgiveness and in my own life I have had to dig very deep to find forgiveness of people that have deeply hurt me. An older friend of mine, a Christian man, has been living with Stage 4 lung cancer for the past year. He told me that he was finding it very difficult to understand how to forgive a person who had hurt him years before but had since died. It is possible to find forgiveness of the dead but it takes work, and especially prayer.

A young patient I met in the hospital was dying of lymphoma. He called for a chaplain late one night because he was very troubled by anger toward his father caused when his father left home for another woman. After we talked for an hour he asked for a phone and immediately called his father to tell him he forgave him for the hurt he had experienced long ago. He died a few weeks later and his sister told me that following the phone call with his dad, her brother had found peace and was able to die reconciled. It is never too late to forgive, for what God offers us freely is to be offered freely to others.

The final petition of the Lord's Prayer comes across as a little misleading. God doesn't lead us into temptation per se, temptation comes to us and in our weakened state we fall for it. I prefer here the modern version that translates the original as "Save us from the time of trial." We all face temptation and trials just as Jesus did. We beseech Jesus to save us from our trials by teaching us how to deal with them and how to reject the ways of the evil one. When we petition God through prayer and listen to God in silence, we can give voice to this wrestling and find strength to endure.

The prayer that Jesus taught us is a succinct prayer for our daily lives, one that touches on all our needs and our desired relationship with God. The prayer acknowledges God's holiness, our desire to live in God's kingdom, our need for basic food and provisions, our need for forgiveness of our sins and our obligation to forgive others, and finally our desire to be saved from life's trials.

Jesus also reminds us in the parable he tells after teaching the prayer that prayer must be persistent. 'Pray without ceasing,' as the ascetics would say. It is through persistence that our

heart is opened more and more to the core of what we uphold before God. God knows our needs before we ask but prayer connects us more deeply, and through persistence we strengthen our resolve and develop a posture of openness to receive God's blessings. Giving up easily shows no real concern for what we seek.

Prayer is best practiced in the context of solitude and silence as I have reiterated many times. The Desert Fathers believed that in solitude they were not alone, but were with God, and that silence was not just not talking but it was actively listening to God.

In our 21st c lives busyness is seen mostly as a virtue and solitude and silence as some sort of new age meditation technique. Finding times for solitude and silence can be incredibly hard but it is a necessary endeavor if we are to draw closer to God. We are in no less need of spiritual rest than these early spiritual fathers.

As a faith community we are the custodians of this house of prayer, this physical space that is the container that can be a place of quiet solitude in a loud and busy world. Many people feel they can only pray, or they can only find God, in places such as these worship spaces. The peace they find, the ineffable aesthetics, sacred music and the ritual of common worship touches the soul in ways that allows God to speak to them. When we open our doors for mass a number of people will wonder in to just sit and pray. It is important for us to open this space up more often than we do so the community can come in to pray and to listen to God.

Today's reflection on prayer is a key aspect of discipleship and adds to the teachings of Jesus on loving our neighbor and the ministry of presence and hospitality that we heard over the past two weeks.

As disciples of Jesus Christ we affirm our common humanity and common desire to draw closer to God so that our lives may be enhanced to enable us to offer the same to others. May you be blessed as your journey deeper with God through solace, silence and prayer.

Amen