

July 27, 2025
Proper 12, Year C
Trinity, St. Louis
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Genesis 18:20-21

Psalms 138

Colossians 2:6-19

Luke 10:25-37

In the Name of the One, Holy, and Living God. Amen.

Today, we hear Luke's version of what we have come to call the Lord's Prayer. Matthew's gospel gives us a slightly different, and longer, version in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount (chapter 6). Luke's version is in response to a nameless disciple who asks, "Lord, teach us to pray."

To get us started, here's a story. A young Episcopal priest became the Rector of a church in a small Midwestern town. At her first clergy association lunch, the president (a Baptist), announced that custom demanded that the newest member offer prayer. "So," he said, "Ms. Smith, from St. Stephen's, is gonna lead us in one of them-there Episcopalian printed prayers." Whereupon the young Rector stood and said, "Let us pray... 'Our Father...'"

We laugh, because the point of the story is that the Lord's Prayer, though printed on paper, is one of the most recognizable prayers in the world. From homes to Sunday School and church, to countless 12-Step meetings, it is one of those things that just about everyone seems to know.

There are some protestant groups in our day that resist its use not only because of their suspicion of set forms of prayer, but also because this prayer, taught by Jesus and commanded by him to be said, is a thoroughly Jewish prayer, and contains little that couldn't be prayed by many other people.

On the other end of the spectrum, its familiarity has often led to a sense of mechanical repetition – sometimes carrying a sense of punishment, as in "say ten Hail Mary's and three Our Fathers." Before the spread of clocks, the Lord's Prayer was often used by cooks to time their recipes, as in "simmer the broth for three Lord's Prayers."¹

So, let's get back to the text. Someone asks Jesus, "teach us to pray." Us, not me. The request, and Jesus's response, emphasize the collective nature of this prayer. There's little room for a piety of "personal decisions for Christ." Rather, it is a communal act, based in a central belief in the coming reign of God, that is in the process

¹ *Consider the Fork: A History of How We Cook and Eat*, Bee Wilson, 2012, Penguin Books.

of being fulfilled in Jesus himself. First and foremost, we are called into prayer with Jesus. The end of such praying is not the fulfillment of what we wanted when we asked how to pray; the end of such praying is the fulfillment of God's reign.

Jesus gives a model of praying that is characterized by simplicity, honesty and trust. But this "simple" formula is the biblical text most commented upon by ancient Christian writers, who reflected on the themes of God's holiness, God's reign, daily sustenance, forgiveness, and deliverance from evil.

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Who taught you how to pray? Despite the communal nature of the Lord's Prayer, my personal prayer life begins with my words coming out of my heart, and through my mouth. I have a friend who says that learning how to pray is less like learning to drive a car than learning to kiss.

You learn something by watching others do it. You should be discerning about whom you will allow to teach you. You certainly make mistakes. And you always worry deep down that you might be doing it wrong.

When that disciple said, "Lord, teach us to pray," I don't think they were hoping to learn a specific technique, or "best practices," like how to achieve the proper balance between praise and petition. Nor do I believe they were asking Jesus to teach them the BEST prayer EVER, one that we would use daily for thousands of years...not that that's a bad thing.

I think that anonymous disciple wanted to learn more about Jesus' love for God. I think "Teach us to pray" is equivalent to "Show us your heart." Just so, when you were taught the Lord's Prayer, maybe you thought you were learning a spiritual practice; I think you were really learning about God.

It's not enough *that* Jesus prays in the Gospels. Jesus invites us into something deeper than merely imitating his practices. This particular model of prayer, along with the passages that follow, invites us into a way of imagining who God is and how God operates. Jesus speaks in confident declarations:

God is holy,
God hears.
God provides.
God forgives.
God protects.
God expects us to be generous to one another.

This is what Jesus is teaching us about God, the God to whom we pray!

But wait, you say! Right there, in black and white, it says, “For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who seeks finds, and for everyone who knocks the door will be opened.” I don’t know about you, but I’m still asking, I’m still seeking, I’m still standing here knocking on locked doors!

But let’s read on to the end. “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 Jesus promises us in answer to our prayers is the Holy Spirit. That’s all. There are no other promises or guarantees.

Well, ouch. Maybe my love for God is thinner than I thought. Maybe I want stuff from God much more than I want God. Perhaps I want God to sweep in and fix everything much more than I want God’s Spirit to fill and accompany me so that I can do my part to heal the world.

I wonder if, when we pray, “give us today our daily bread,” we often mean “thanks for making sure I have what I need.” Personal gratitude is a fine thing – but it remains personal and individual. Gregory of Nyssa, one of those ancient commentators I mentioned wrote, “When we say to God, “Give bread,” we do not ask for delights, riches, and flowery robes. We do not seek the beauty of gold and the glow of precious stones. We do not request an abundance of land, the command of armies, superiority in war, and governance over nations. We do not desire horses, cattle, and herds of other grazing animals. We do not aspire to pomp in the marketplace, and acclamation by setting up monuments or public portraits. We ask for none of these by which the soul is distracted from the divine and noble cares. We pray only for bread.”²

Praying “give us today our daily bread,” gives us the opportunity to remember that people in Haiti, Mali, South Sudan, Sudan, and Gaza are facing the immediate threat of starvation on a daily basis. For these children of God, along with people in Nigeria, Yemen, and Somalia, not to mention the Central West End, daily bread is not a matter of necessity, but of urgency. To pray “give us” is to pray “give all of us.”

Such bread, of course, does not magically appear all by itself, nor through the wishing of “thoughts and prayers.” Bread for all of us appears through acts of sharing and mutual support. Here’s Gregory again, linking the simplicity of bread with the necessity of justice:

You are the true director of your prayer when your abundance does not come from what belongs to others; if your income is not derived from

² *On the Lord’s Prayer*, 4. Trans. Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, https://orthodoxprayer.org/Articles_files/GregoryNyssa-Homily4%20Lords%20Prayer.html, adapted.

tears; if no one goes hungry because of your being full; if no one groans on account of your plenty. Indeed, this is the bread from God: the fruit of justice, the stalk of peace, the bread that is pure and unmixed with the seeds of weeds.³

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

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Someone asked, “Lord, teach us to pray.” When Jesus teaches about prayer, he uses only plural pronouns: “our” “us” “we.” The parable that follows explores a relationship between two friends. This is no accident. When we pray, really pray, for all of us, the way in which we live our lives will change.

When faced with unanswered prayers and the sufferings of the world, Jesus doesn’t invite me to pray – Jesus invites us to pray. We pray because it’s what God’s children do. We pray because we yearn, and our yearning is precious to God. And we pray because what we need most — whether we know it or not — is God’s own Spirit pouring God’s self into us for the sake of others. With or without words, through laughter or tears, in hope or despair, our prayers remind us that we are not alone in this broken, aching world. And our prayers usher in God’s Holy Spirit who teaches us how we are called to prepare for the day when, as the old song says, “the darkness shall turn into morning, and the morning to noonday bright. And Christ's great kingdom shall come on earth — the kingdom of love and light.”⁴

Lord, teach us to pray. Amen.

³ Gregory, op. cit.

⁴ *We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations*, H. Ernest Nichol, 1896.