

THIS IS HOW YOU PRAY
Luke 18:1-8
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, June 30, 2013

Eugene Peterson once said, “The most important thing any pastor can ever teach his congregation is how to pray.” For the last four Sundays the sermons have focused on both the importance of prayer, which in essence is conversation with God.

Prayer isn’t an inner dialogue with yourself, a stream of consciousness that helps you think through your problems. Instead, when you pray, you speak and God listens, then God speaks and you listen. Through prayer you’re able to engage in open and heartfelt, two-way conversations, not to inform God of what he needs to know (God already knows) but so God can inform you about what you need to know and can’t figure out on your own, plus realizing that God is the One you’re talking to.

If you missed last Sunday’s, or any other of these sermons on prayer, and you’re curious about what’s already been said, you can pick up copies of these sermons in the Narthex or you can go online at our Website. I’m tempted to summarize what’s already been said, but time is short and we must move on.

So today I invite you to focus on the three distinct, all encompassing petitions found in the Lord’s Prayer Jesus taught in response to the unnamed disciple’s request, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Probably delighted that at last someone was moved enough to make that request, Jesus told them to pray this way, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...”

Jesus didn’t want his prayer to become a “holy” poem recited only on special occasions, but as a pattern for all our individual prayers to follow. After the opening salutation acknowledging God as both great and terrible, but also intimate and nurturing there follows the top three requests we should always be prepared to pray for:

- 1) Our daily bread
- 2) Forgiveness for our sins in proportion to our forgiveness of others
- 3) Inner strength to resist temptation and divine protection from evil.

Believe it or not, these three petitions cover everything we need to be sustained as God’s children and Christ’s disciples. According to the Lord’s Prayer, we need to be fed, physically and spiritually, one day at a time. We need to be forgiven for our wrongs as much as we need to forgive others for their wrongs. And last but not least, we need to be taken by the hand and be led, if not dragged, from anything or anyone who’d try to separate us from God, plus, because on our own we’re both vulnerable and helpless, we need to be protected from the Evil One who seeks to destroy us.

“Give us this day our daily bread...” It’s probably surprising that right after we acknowledge the holiness of God we immediately start asking for something, as if we tried to butter God up before asking for favors. But by putting this request first, Jesus

sends the signal God wants us to ask him for what we need. Far from being a reluctant giver, God stands ready to give us whatever we need.

What did Jesus mean by “daily bread?” Certainly he means anything that covers our physical needs, and this is important, that’s within God’s will. If you pray for a date with Paris Hilton chances are God will say “no” for your own good. But if you pray for the right life partner, or for children or good friends, God will probably give you what you ask for, as long as it’s good for you. Likewise if you pray for a gourmet meal every day, you’ll probably have to settle for whatever’s put in front of you. You get the point. God only provides just enough every day, no more no less.

Why only one day at a time? Because God wants you to learn how to trust him. Remember the story of the Jews wandering in the wilderness for forty years after their exodus from Egypt? Each day they were instructed to go out into the fields to gather up, what Moses called, “manna from heaven,” which was actually a sticky protein filled substance secreted by a certain strain of insects peculiar to that part of the world. But some of the Israelites gathered up much more than they needed and hid it in their tents, just in case there was none to be found the next day, only to discover by the next day the hidden manna putrefied and gave off a foul smelling odor. Lesson learned, trust God will provide just enough every day, no more no less.

But God’s daily bread doesn’t just cover our physical needs. Jesus said, “I am the Bread of Life, come to me and you’ll never hunger...” Every day God provides just enough faith, hope and love to satisfy your soul. The members of Alcoholics Anonymous already know this to be true. Why else would one of their mottos be, “One day at a time,” and why else would they close each AA meeting praying the Lord’s Prayer? They trust their lives to that High Power who gives them, each day, whatever they need, inner strength and spirit-filled relationships to maintain their sobriety.

The next petition asks for another of the essentials: forgiveness. Christ died on the cross to guarantee our forgiveness. Only one without sin could make this happen. Forgiveness tears down the wall separating us from God thus making friendship possible. You know what it’s like to be forgiven. Your guilt dissipates, the gulf between you and God disappears. Being not only forgiven but also pardoned is one of the great experiences in life. Likewise when you get forgiveness from someone you wronged and hurt, the minute you hear the other say, “I forgive you,” the darkness lifts, your heavy burden is thrown off and your relationship is restored. It’s good to be forgiven.

But, there’s a condition on your forgiveness. If you’re willing to be forgiven for your sin you’re also obligated to forgive the one who sinned against you. You might say, sometimes it’s impossible to forgive someone who hurt you. If that’s true then maybe you should consider how hard it is for God to forgive you. Even so, you are forgiven because Jesus paid the hard price.

In Luke’s Gospel we find Jesus’ parable of the steward who begged his Master to wipe out the large debts he owed him, and being merciful the steward’s debts were forgiven. Soon afterward a servant begged the same steward to cancel his debts, instead

he showed no mercy and threw him in prison. When the Master heard about his steward's actions he was furious and his steward was summarily punished.

Why is it so important to forgive? Because it's good for the soul. You suddenly become Christ-like whenever you forgive and bear witness to the Gospel of love. On the other hand, refusing to forgive causes you to be consumed by an anger and bitterness that keeps you from embracing your humanity. That's why being forgiven and forgiving others is linked together. Apparently, you can't have one without the other.

Then the final petition, "...and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" reminds us we have a powerful enemy out to deceive and destroy us, but not powerful enough to overcome God.

The presence of evil is personified in the Evil One who makes giving into temptation as attractive as possible. Somehow, just by being aware of this ruse helps reinforce our resistance. When I was a boy I had a book of Bible stories and the illustration accompanying the story of the three temptations of Christ showed Jesus looking haggard and worn after his forty day wilderness fast, hardly able to resist anything. Satan, on the other hand, was beyond handsome and looked downright strong and beautiful while seductively offering Jesus the easy way out from being a servant, suffering Messiah and instead becoming a triumphant, powerful Messiah. Likewise when we're tempted, it's also hard to resist because we can't always see the dire consequence that comes from giving into temptation. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden our forbidden fruit is equally pleasing to the eye, until we take that first bite and our eyes are opened leaving us to wonder only too late, "Oh God, what have I done?"

Yet it's still possible to resist temptation by acknowledging that Silent Voice speaking in our inner ear, "Don't do this, get out of here, turn around and come to me as fast as you can!" It's then we can allow God to lead us away and shield us from evil's grip.

Finally the prayer Jesus taught us affirms the absolute grandeur, majesty and otherness of God, "for thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen." In a very real sense the Lord's Prayer ends as it began, reaffirming that the same God who lives within us is really far beyond us.

Rick Warren wrote, "The more you pray, the less you panic. The more you worship the less you worry..." Frederick Buechner wrote, "Go where your best prayer takes you." Martin Luther wrote, "I have so much to do each day I spend the first three hours in prayer." Dwight L. Moody wrote, "He who kneels the most, stands the best."

Do you think they're trying to tell us something?

Let us pray.