

## Jesus' Teachings on Prayer

Luke 11:1-13 *"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."*

As Jesus finishes his own time of prayer, one of the disciples approaches him: Jesus, teach us how to pray, as John the Baptist taught his disciples. It is a simple, straightforward, and important request. If prayer, however we understand it, is our communion with God, then we want to know how to do it. We want to be able to do it, whether we are beginners or have been at it for years. We can even know a lot ABOUT prayer and read dozens of books on it, and still not really be praying. I find the best approach is to always make this disciple's question my own: Jesus, teach me how to pray.

Jesus does not give a lecture on prayer. He does not offer a technique or a system for the practice of prayer. He gives his disciples a prayer to pray. This tells me two things. First, Jesus seemed to think that we best learn to pray by praying. We start praying and go from there toward fuller understanding and practice. Second, Jesus gives the disciples a kind of model or essential prayer. We know it as the Lord's Prayer. It would be better to call it the Disciples' Prayer; it is the one he gave them and us to pray. It is a prayer for those who are giving themselves to the life of faith, who are on the journey. The version of the prayer in Luke's gospel is briefer, more concise than the one in Matthew's gospel. Scholars think it is closer to what Jesus actually said. I like Luke's version for its brevity and simplicity, and its punch!

"Father, hallowed be your name." Addressing God as Father affirms our intimate relationship with the Source of Life. Taking "Father" literally, as though God were masculine, creates problems, especially for those for whom "father" conjures up experiences of hurt, fear, or otherwise an absence of love. We could just as well say "Mother," because it is the parental, life-giving nature of God that is meant. When we pray, we are touching our relationship with the Power which is at the heart of life, which gives and sustains our lives. This is not an impersonal cosmic "force," but a Steadfast Love that cares for us, renews us, and is with and for us. That is the important thing.

"Hallowed be your name." In Jesus' religious tradition, the "name" of God was sacred and beyond human words and thought. In Hebrew, this essential and most sacred name of God (transliterated from Hebrew as YHWH) was not to be pronounced at all. The true name of God--God's essence and nature--is beyond all words, images, and thoughts. Every image and word we use to speak about God is insufficient. Of course we need to use words and mental images, but we always need to remember that they are only pointers to a Reality that is beyond them all.

To pray that God's name be hallowed means to live with awed reverence for the Power and Source of life that is beyond the grasp of our minds, beyond our emotions, beyond the human purposes to which we want to attach it. We hallow, or keep sacred, God's name, God's reality, by living with awe and reverence for life. If we are praying and living that way, I think everything else will follow.

"Your kingdom come." Or "let your kingdom come". This is about our living on God's good earth in the ways God made us to live--with compassion, mercy, justice, forgiveness, peace, generosity. It is God's permeating of our own lives and the life of humanity so that, as Psalm 85 says, "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky." If we are praying that God's kingdom come, we will also become persons and communities in which that kingdom increasingly dwells. Our lives and our life as a community will be signs of the presence and dawning of God's kingdom.

"Gives us each day our daily bread." What if we changed the way we think and live in terms of our material life? What if we increased in deep gratitude for having just enough of what we need for

each day of life--each bite of food, drink of water, or breath of air? What if we became more aware of how we attach our peace and happiness to obtaining more than we need for each day of life, and then dropped those attachments? Praying that God give us just enough for each day can help us overcome the sickness of our spirits that comes with having, wanting, and trying to achieve too much. Praying for daily bread can lead us into contentment and gratitude, and more generous and joyous lives. I think this explains why we find that the most joyful and generous human beings are often those who have less in terms of possessions.

"And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." Covenant and Community Members commit themselves to "being a channel of God's love and forgiveness in every relationship." We all agree that it is the most challenging of disciplines. Maybe that's because we see it as a kind of law imposed on us, which we must strain every moral fiber to fulfill. No wonder it is not only difficult but joyless! What if we looked at it another way. We have this marvelous debt that we owe to life itself. It is God's loving of us, from which nothing we have done or can do will ever separate us (Romans 8:31-19). If we, each day, live with growing and deepening awareness of God's forgiving love for us, how can we not then turn toward others with a greater willingness and ability to cut them loose from our anger, grudge-holding, and desire for payback? The flip side is also true. If we are practicing forgiveness in our relationships with others, then we are opening wider the doors and windows of our own souls to the freshening, renewing breezes of God's loving forgiveness.

"And do not bring us to the time of trial." The life to which Jesus calls us is challenging and difficult, not because we are sinful creatures and it is not in our nature, but because of the world in which we live. The human family gets so thoroughly lost in values, pursuits, and distractions that run counter to the life of living out God's love and will. It is no wonder we might pray that God would keep us from situations where we will be challenged and tested. It means simply that we seek God's protection from tests and temptations that challenge and threaten our faith and faithfulness. We know how hard that can be, and we know our weaknesses. But if, and when, these things happen, we will go through them with God's strength and leading.

This Disciples' Prayer contains everything essential for us as those who are on the journey of faith, the journey of following Jesus. We pray it so often and absentmindedly that we miss its breadth and depth, its richness and completeness. It might be a tremendously renewing process for us if for a while--a month, a year, or longer--we prayed this prayer, in this brief form that we find it in Luke, each day. If we prayed it with awareness and attentiveness, praying not just with our minds but with our whole being, reflecting on its meaning for our lives and the world, what new life might come about, in us and in the world?

Jesus follows with a teaching about perseverance in prayer and life. Luke's Greek word for "persistence" actually means "shamelessness". Don't be ashamed to ask for what you need. And keep at it. We are sometimes afraid of that. It sounds too selfish, so we piously say, Oh, but it's better to just ask that God's will be done. Yet that is not what Jesus is saying here.

A man goes to a friend's house late at night. He has a guest and does not have something for his guest to eat. This is a terrible situation because the practice of hospitality in Jesus' day and time was the supreme social requirement. To be unable to host one's guests would be not only an embarrassment but failure in a social, even spiritual, obligation. Jesus says that even the man, who is unmoved by his friendship with the fellow at his door, will eventually respond to the persistence of his friend. If that is so among us humans, how much more readily will God respond to our needs, God who created and loves us?

I think Jesus means that God will give us what we need in order to fulfill the kinds of lives for which we are created and to which God calls us. We need not be ashamed of or reluctant in praying for whatever is needed to be faithful to what God calls us to be and do. When we are striving not only to pray the Disciples' Prayer but to live it, God will not withhold what we need along the way.

Ask. Search. Knock. This is similar to the part about persevering in prayer. It is an even more vivid call to be active in our praying. The practice of prayer, all of what we call the spiritual life, is not passive. It involves our whole being. It is reaching out, searching, asking, knocking on the door that opens to the sacred dimension of life, God, and the unfolding of our lives in relationship to God. I think that these two teachings on persistence or shamelessness, and asking, seeking, and knocking, explain quite well why we speak of the life of faith as a lifelong journey. The inward and outward dimensions of our lives need ongoing, daily attention. And Jesus himself is not ashamed to say that keeping with it will bring more and more of God's goodness.

And so the reading ends with Jesus saying that if even we human beings know how to give good gifts to our children, God will give us the Holy Spirit--the greatest of good gifts--when we ask, search, and knock, when our whole life becomes this kind of praying and living. Jesus' view is that God's spirit is the greatest of gifts. God's spirit refreshes and empowers us in the life of God's kingdom. The spirit awakens our spirits to awe and reverence. The spirit reveals to us what we truly need for each day of life and stirs up in us gratitude for what we have. God's spirit helps us in times of testing and struggle, when the life of faithfulness becomes so hard. The spirit of God encourages us to be shameless and persistent in praying for what we need to live as followers of Jesus. As we live our lives as a journey of faith and faithfulness, asking, searching, knocking, we find that God's spirit becomes increasingly present in us as wisdom, peace, insight, and joy. Of all that we need for life, God's spirit is the greatest of gifts.