

Sermon: Lord Teach us to Pray
Rogate Sunday, 29 May 2011
Paderborn
Text: Luke 11:1-13
Rev. James R. Gorman

Luke 11

Jesus' Teaching on Prayer

¹ One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

² He said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father,^[a]
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.^[b]

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.^[c]
And lead us not into temptation.^[d]"

⁵ Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.' ⁷ And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity^[e] he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

⁹ "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

¹¹ "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for^[f] a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

I bring you greetings from the Evangelical and Reformed, United Church of Christ in Waukesha, Wisconsin. Our Church is of German heritage within the Reformed tradition. Our families emigrated in the 1850s to the US. But now we are a mixed congregation representing many different Christian traditions, many of them Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed.

Today I want to talk to you about prayer.

When I was 13 years old, I was confirmed in the faith at a small congregation in a rural community southeast of Chicago, Illinois. Chicago is a city the size of Berlin.

At that time, there was a tradition in our congregation that the Sunday prior to confirmation Sunday (which in my day was Palm Sunday) was what we called "Question Sunday." On that Sunday, all the confirmands were told to stand in front of the congregation and the Pastor would ask questions from the Catechism. In the United Church of Christ there are two main catechisms (for those churches that use catechisms) – the Heidelberg Catechism and the Evangelical Catechism. The catechism I grew up with was the Evangelical Catechism which was a version of Luther's Small Catechism.

Each of the Confirmands was assigned a question from the Catechism ahead of time so that we could memorize the answer in our homes and recite that answer before the congregation on Question Sunday. It was a moment of fear and trembling for this thirteen year-old.

My question to memorize the answer to was: "What is Prayer?" And to this day, I remember the answer. "Prayer is the conversation of the heart with God for the purposes of praising God, asking God for the needs of ourselves and others and thanking God for whatever God gives us."

I don't remember very many of the other questions from the Evangelical Catechism, but that one is solidly in my mind and heart. It is burned into the base of my brain, along with Hamlet's soliloquy and several advertisements from my youth.

So, I know WHAT prayer is. "It is the conversation of the heart with God." I know what it is, but I, like the disciples of Jesus, I don't know "how" to pray.

"Lord, teach us to pray" they plead.

And in their innocent question, they speak for the church as a whole. "Lord, teach us to pray."

And Jesus does not say, "What?! All those years in the synagogue and you don't know how to pray?"

"What?! You have been my followers for all these months and you don't know how to pray?" He would have been fully within his right as a rabbi to say such things. But he doesn't. The record shows that Jesus embraced the question

and quietly taught them how to pray. He told them to pray like this:

“When you pray, say:

“Father,^[a]
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.^[b]
³ Give us each day our daily bread.
⁴ Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.^[c]
And lead us not into temptation.^[d]”

I have discovered in my later adult life that I do not know how to pray as I ought. So, I am fully with the disciples who beg Jesus to teach them to pray.

And I am also deeply grateful that Paul says that in Romans 8, and for me, for most of us.

We do not know how to pray as we ought, but I have some comfort from the Apostle Paul who says in his letter to the church at Rome, “the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” (Revised Standard Version).

Luther has it as “unaussprechlichem Seufzen.” Which is similar to the Revised Standard version “sighs too deep for words.”

“unaussprechlichem Seufzen.” Literally “Unspeakable Sighs.”

“unaussprechlichem Seufzen.” This is the beginning and ending of all prayer.

When confronted with one of life's many deep difficulties—a diagnosis of cancer, that horrible time between the taking of the biopsy and the news from the labs, the loss of everything because of a tornado or hurricane or tsunami, the death of a partner of 25 years , we don't even know where to begin praying. We don't know how to pray as we ought. So we await the Holy Spirit with “unaussprechlichem Seufzen.”

"Ask," Jesus says, "and it will be given to you;

seek, and you will find;

knock, and the door will be opened to you."

But what shall we ask for?

What, exactly do we seek? In the hour of our greatest need?

On what door shall we knock.

We do not know how to pray as we ought

Ask as we ought.

Seek as we ought.

Our Church in Waukesha, Wisconsin burned to the ground in a bitter cold

December night in 2005. It was a Gothic structure built in 1891 with 27 stained glass windows, a fine organ, all our hymnals, a newly renovated kitchen—all of it gone in a blaze that reached into the heavens. And I didn't know how to pray that night as I walked around in the below zero degree weather (minus 16 degree Celsius).

What shall I pray for?

Should I ask that the building be rebuilt just as it was? Should I seek another job? Am I up to, or in anyway prepared for, the difficulties that lie ahead? Or should I just pray that the Holy Spirit guide and protect us through this time of wandering while we wait for the old building to be torn down and a new one rebuilt.

Should I pray that this community of God's people remain united through its time of homelessness and that it not be divided by the many choices it would have to make in the months, maybe even years that lie ahead? Should I pray as Jesus prayed for his disciples, Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. (John 17:11b)

But Luke's version of the Lord's prayer is simple really. Simpler than Matthew's version. When asked how to pray, Jesus suggests that you only pray for four things:

That God's kingdom of justice and peace come;
that we have enough bread for this day;
that we be forgiven of our sins and that we not be too greatly tested or tempted.

And then Jesus instructs his disciples that prayer has an active component as well. It is not just that sweet hour in which we remove ourselves from the world around us. Rather, prayer ultimately moves us back to that world and challenges us to lead a prayerful life. Prayer is not an escape from worldly cares as the old 19th Century English hymn put it, "Sweet hour of Prayer, sweet hour of prayer that leads me from a world of care."

Prayer was never meant to be anything like that. It is also a discipline that moves us forthrightly to confront the very worldly things that so much challenge us to pray to begin with. Your Kingdom come, your will be done.

Prayer, if done right, if it is authentically engaged with things I need rather than things I want, will of necessity be subversive. It makes us part of a holy counterculture. Set apart from the world around us to be witnesses to the fact that another world is possible and being called into being by a God who intends that this world be a honest reflection of God's world. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

When we pray like this, we become citizens of the kingdom of God which is a place that can't be found with a GPS device. It is a global kingdom not restricted

to one country.

I suppose that many Americans think that the killing of Osama bin Laden was the answer to our most urgent prayer. But Jesus asks us to pray, not that our enemies will be caught and, as we like to say, “Brought to justice” but rather to pray for our enemies and those that spitefully use us.

My cousin, Donna, lost her husband in the falling of the first of the twin towers on September 11, 2001, leaving her to raise two adolescent children, Amanda and Andrew, by herself.

She was and is a devoted Roman Catholic. She said in 2001 “I pray that God’s healing love and spirit of peace surround all those who seek to do us harm.”

And a week ago, she was asked again what she thought about the killing of Osama bin Laden.

“I’m proud to be an American,” Donna said, “I’m glad this force of evil is gone.”

“Quite frankly, my first reaction was to pray for his soul,” she said. The key to her sense of peace, she said, was the grace of the moment in surrendering all to God.

“On the day of or very shortly after 9/11, I had a conversation with God and I said, ‘This is beyond my ability to handle.’ And at that moment, I gave it all to God, I truly did,” my cousin, Donna, said.

“There’s this certainty on my part that God’s in charge,” Donna said. “I can’t be comfortable with someone being killed but... I derive my peace from another source. I truly believe God put everything in place for this to happen the way it did and remove a source of evil from the world.”¹

“That’s stopped, thank God,” Killoughey said.

That is a true conversation of the heart with God.

And that is what prayer must finally be.

A conversation of the heart.

With sighs too deep for words.

Sometimes subversive.

But always from the heart.

Amen.

¹ [from an article by Joyce Coronel | May 3, 2011 | *The Catholic Sun*