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Lord, Teach Us to Pray
 Luke 11:1-13

One of my earliest memories is of my dad and mom teaching me the Lord's Prayer at bedtime. Dad sits by my bed; mom stands in the doorway. And dad asks me to repeat the prayer, line by line. "Our Father" – "Our Father," "Who art in heaven" – "Who art in heaven," "Hallowed be thy name" – Hallowed be thy name." I don't fully understand the prayer. At one point, I think that God's name is "Art," because "Art" is in heaven. That's not unlike the little girl who doesn't quite get the "trespasses" part and she adds an environmental petition, "Forgive us our trash, as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets." But what I do sense clearly, even as a four-year old, is that the prayer is very important!

Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer to the disciples in response to a very surprising request. The disciples implore Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." But the disciples are already men of prayer. As toddlers, they are taught the prayer that every Israelite child prays before bed, "*Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.*" As youth, they learn to recite the shema, Israel's confession of faith, "*Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.*" As adults, they face Jerusalem and pray at 9:00 a.m., noon and 3:00 p.m.

The disciples pray when they get up in the morning and when they go to bed; they pray in the synagogue; they pray prayers of thanksgiving throughout the day; they pray before meals. So what is it about Jesus' prayers that compel them to ask, "Lord teach us to pray?" Do they sense that Jesus' prayers are more direct, more immediate, and more intimate than their own?

We, too, ask our Lord, "Lord, teach us to pray!" With our frenetic lifestyles, many of us find it difficult to carve out time for prayer. When we do sit down to pray, our attention often wanders. We may feel self-conscious. We may find it difficult to sort out the rush of thoughts that flood through our minds. But most of us would agree with John Killinger,

If there is one sin that hurts us more than all others, it is surely the sin of not praying. We are meant to live in the Spirit of God – to live joyfully, vibrantly, and lovingly in the world. But if we do not pray, we can't live in the Spirit. It is as simple as that. Without prayer, we lack the daily connection to God that makes a meaningful life possible.

So when the first disciples ask, "Lord, teach us to pray," Jesus shares a much loved, but often little understood 65-word prayer that takes less than 25 seconds to pray. I'm particularly fond of this modern translation of the Lord's Prayer, "*Our*

Father in heaven, holy is your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, now and forever more. Amen.” But when I arrived in McHenry in 1977 and found that the organizing pastor of the church insisted on using that version, I was besieged by requests to “Please, please, please, let us pray the Lord’s Prayer as we learned it.” Tradition dies hard. So let’s listen to Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer:

Luke 11:1-13

The Lord’s Prayer is very brief, consisting of just six petitions. So our prayers don’t have to be long. God isn’t standing in heaven with a stopwatch ready to click it, if we pray briefly, and say, “Too short! It doesn’t count.” Our prayers can be short, intense and frequent. When a violent storm catches the disciples as they cross the Sea of Galilee, threatening to capsize their boat, they scream three words, “Lord, save us.” The prayer of a Norwegian fisherman is simple, but moving, “Lord, help. The sea is so big, and my boat is so small.” As is this prayer of a Nigerian schoolgirl, “O Great Chief, light a candle in my heart, so I may see within and sweep the rubbish from Thy dwelling place.” So God is not a reluctant Giver from whom we have to wrest tidbits of grace and blessing.

Over and over Scripture tells us to use words carefully, “*for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*” We’re told “*a gentle word turns away wrath,*” and that “*a great forest is set on fire by a single spark.*” Words can heal or hurt, encourage or discourage, reconcile or divide!

The Lord’s Prayer is very brief, and it uses very simple language, “*Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.*” So while we’re moved by eloquent prayers, such as the prayer of St. Patrick,

*May the strength of God pilot us; May the power of God preserve us.
May the wisdom of God instruct us; May the hand of God protect us.
May the way of God direct us. May the shield of God defend us . . .
May Christ be with us, Christ before us, Christ in us, Christ over us!
May your salvation, O Lord, be always ours, this day and forever more!*

Our prayers can be as simple as, “Help me,” or “Thank God,” or “Lord, I just don’t know what to do.”

The Lord’s Prayer is in the vernacular or in our common language. In the time of Jesus, Jewish prayers and Scripture readings are always offered in Hebrew, just as today, Muslims pray in Arabic. But Jesus begins the prayer by praying, “Abba,” an Aramaic word meaning, “Daddy.” In so doing, Jesus not only invites us to have an intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father, as intimate as the relationship between a parent and a toddler, but He summons us to pray

using whatever words come to our heart and mind. So while “both Judaism and Islam have a sacred language, (Ken Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, p. 95), we Christians do not.”

So we can pour out our hearts to our Heavenly Father. A little over five years ago, an ultrasound discovered that Mary Ann had an ovarian tumor. Her doctor called and said, “You must come in today.” When we arrive, her doctor has to consult on an emergency, so we wait in the examination room for almost an hour. The wait is agonizing. We try to talk, but we’re both consumed with fear. And all I can pray is, “Lord, help. Help us. Help us. Help us.” But such a prayer is real; it is down-to-earth, so God honors it.

But when Jews and Muslims use a special language for prayer, it does protect them from taking God casually. Once in a Jewish seminary, a student writes the divine name, “Yahweh,” on a blackboard. When the professor sees it, he immediately expels the student and orders that the blackboard be taken down from the wall, taken out and burned. We may not go that far, but God is our Creator, the majestic and holy One. So the Psalmist warns the kings of the earth, *“Be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.”* God is personal and intimate, but God is not our buddy!

The Lord’s Prayer begins by focusing on God, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” So prayer in its essence isn’t presenting God with a laundry list of our ways. True prayer begins with fellowship, with communing, with entering God’s presence as the divine lover of our souls. Prayer is about finding God.

Scholar Ken Bailey tells of meeting a young Christian in Latvia after the fall of the Soviet Union. This young woman tells Bailey, “There was no church in my village. None of my family believed. I had never heard of the Bible.” “Then,” asks Bailey, “How did you come to faith?”

And the young woman says this, *“At funerals we recited the Lord’s Prayer. As a young child I heard these strange words and had no idea who we were talking to, what the words meant, where they came from or why we were reciting them. When freedom came at last, I could search for their meaning. When you are in total darkness, the tiniest point of light is very bright. For me, the Lord’s Prayer was that point of light. By the time I found its meaning, I was a Christian.”* Prayer is first about seeking the God, who is, in fact, all the while seeking us.

But while the Lord’s Prayer first directs our attention to God, it takes seriously our most personal needs, “Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Keep us from temptation and deliver us from evil.” We need not be embarrassed to pray for the most practical of concerns – that our newborn sleep through the night, that our autistic child find his place, that we’re hired for a job that uses our gifts and passions, that a spark be rekindled in

our marriage, that we can resist the temptation of pornography or alcohol, that a biopsy come back negative, that we find solace when a loved one dies, or that we discover how we are to best use our time, talents and treasures.

What attracts the most attention in public prayer, at a funeral, for example, is whether we are to pray, “debts and debtors,” “trespasses,” or “sins.” Using “debts” or being indebted means that we have left something undone. We don’t pay our bills; we walk past a homeless man; we think nothing of re-modeling our kitchen, but refuse to help the poor; we resist confessing the many ways we fall short of glory of God.

Using “sins” or “trespasses” focuses on actions that hurt or harm another person – we gossip about a neighbor; we refuse to forgive an extended family member; we cheat on our expense account; or we damage our bodies, temples of the Holy Spirit, by eating or drinking to excess. Strikingly in Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, he speaks only of “debts.” In Luke’s version, he speaks of both “debts” and “sins” or “trespasses.” Luke’s Jesus prays, “*Forgive us our sins, as we forgive everyone who is indebted to us.*” True prayer involves confession, acknowledging both what we have done and what we have left undone.

The closing benediction, “*For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever,*” isn’t in most early New Testament manuscripts. But it does call attention to God’s dominion and power. It calls us to be citizens of the kingdom of God, to declare that our ultimate allegiance is to the one, true, living God, in whom we live and breathe and have our being.

The Lord’s Prayer is just 65 words, but it teaches us that we can pray briefly or in a lengthy time of communion without God. It teaches us to pray as we can, not as we can’t, to pray from the heart. The Lord’s Prayer directs our attention first to God, lifting us above our personal self-interest, but it also takes our most personal needs seriously. It calls us to confession and to make clear whom we serve. As Joshua declares to Israel before he dies, “*As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*”

So how do we pray the Lord’s Prayer? We can simply recite it when we awake or before we go to bed. We can pray it petition by petition, in rhythm with our breathing, focusing on the meaning of each phrase. We can take a petition, and use that as our prayer, “*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name,*” perhaps emphasizing one of the words, “*Our Father,*” or “*Our Father,*” or “*Our Father, who art in heaven.*” Let the words seep into your consciousness.

Or use the insert that I’ve prepared, which contains provocative questions. For example, when we pray, “Forgive us our debts,” we ask ourselves: What have I left undone?” Or when we pray, “As we forgive our debtors, we ask, “Who do I need to forgive?”

But as we begin our Lenten journey, let me return to the words of John Killinger, *“If there is one sin that hurts us more than all others, it is surely the sin of not praying. We are meant to live in the Spirit of God – to live joyfully, vibrantly, and lovingly in the world. But if we do not pray, we can’t live in the Spirit. It is as simple as that. Without prayer, we lack the daily connection to God that makes a meaningful life possible.*

So that we may be whole, forgiven, and passionate people, using our gifts to bless others, may we continue to ask, “Lord, teach us to pray!” Amen.