

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

Three weeks ago, I began a sermon series on prayer. So far, I've talked about ways to pray, and the importance of intercessory prayer—praying for others. Today I'm going to finish this series with a consideration of the prayer that Jesus taught us, known to us as the "Lord's Prayer," the prayer that we and countless others offer to God at least every Sunday, if not every day.

My first sermon on prayer was mostly about the inner work of deepening our relationship with God or the sacred. The second began to move us outward toward deepening our relationships with others. The Lord's Prayer moves us even further into a compassionate and active concern for the whole of creation. I chose Luke's version, for our gospel reading, because it is somewhat different from the version we usually use. But because it is the one we are used to, I'm going to discuss the version we know so well, the one that begins: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.*

There is something very important for us to know about the word Jesus uses to address God—the word we translate as "Father." Jesus uses the Aramaic word "Abba," a word that is much more akin to our modern "Daddy," than to the much more formal and distant "Father." Jesus teaches us to pray not to a distant God, a frightening God, a God we hardly dare to approach, but to a warm and loving God whom we can know as "Daddy."

In recent years, there has been a lot of concern, in theological and church circles, with the use of only masculine "Father" language for God. There are important issues here, but, for now, I'd like to address just one of these. If we have been hurt, in body or spirit, by an abusive father, it can be hard to imagine God as a loving father. We may even project onto God the hurtful characteristics of our earthly fathers, seeing God as angry, judging, punitive, and even cruel. To address God as Abba, the loving parent that we wish we had, may help us to get beyond our painful associations with the word "Father."

After praying that God's name be held holy, Jesus prays, *Thy kingdom come.* Oppressive political kingdoms were a present reality for the people Jesus was speaking to. His audience was mainly poor peasants who suffered greatly under the reign of Herod and Caesar. So when Jesus speaks of the "Kingdom of God," it has a political as well as a religious meaning. According to Marcus Borg, in *The Heart of Christianity*, the Kingdom of God is *what life would be like on earth if God were king and rulers of this world were not. The Kingdom of God is about God's justice in contrast to the systemic injustice of the kingdoms and domination systems of this world.* So praying for God's Kingdom to come is about what should be happening in this world, *at this time*, and not about some distant, future heaven.

The familiar version we say each Sunday continues with the words, *thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*. I have known, and you may have, too, people who believe that God's will is already being done, *on earth as it is in heaven*— and who insist that everything that happens is “God's will.” I've also known people whose faith was weakened, or even shattered, by someone telling them that some awful thing that happened was God's will. The father of one of my college friends left the church forever when his priest told him that the premature birth and death of his twin baby girls was God's will. When I saw the movie, “Titanic,” I remembered a song my sons brought back from camp which implied that the loss of the Titanic was somehow God's doing.

I think that we often look for God's will in the bad things that happen to us, because we desperately want our lives to make sense, and tragedy so often seems senseless. Believing that our suffering is God's will is somehow easier than believing that it has no meaning at all. But there are two major problems with this kind of thinking. First of all, it makes God into a cruel and capricious monster, a God difficult to love and impossible to trust. I remember a woman in a Bible study class saying that if she thought, for one second, that God was responsible for the Holocaust, she could no longer believe in God.

The second problem with thinking that the bad things that happen to us are God's will, is that it lets *us* off the hook far too easily. Let's return to the story of the Titanic for a moment. One of the things the movie did very well was to document all the *human* errors, miscalculations, pride-filled misjudgments, and sickening snobbery, that went into the making of that particular tragedy. If we assign tragedy to God's will, then we are far less likely to look for, and to try to root out, the human actions that are generally the real cause of suffering. If we believe it is God's will that a child gets leukemia, then we are less likely to ask whether the waste dump from a nearby factory had anything to do with it. If we believe that it is God's will that our friend died in a car accident, then we are less likely to call for stricter laws which might have kept the drunk who hit him off the road. If we believe that it is God's will that some people are so poor they have to comb garbage dumpsters for their daily bread, while diners in a nearby restaurant leave food on their plates because they just can't eat another bite, then we are less likely to strive for a just world in which everyone has enough to meet their daily needs. When Jesus prays that God's will be done, he is praying for metanoia— for the change of heart *and* behavior— that recognizes our own human responsibility for the fact that God's will is *not* done on earth as it is in heaven. To quote John Dominic Crossan, *Heaven's in great shape; earth is where the problems are*.

Jesus next instructs us to ask God to meet our basic needs, with the words, *Give us this day our daily bread*. We should be careful not to over-spiritualize this petition, viewing “daily bread” as some kind of spiritual sustenance. It's not wrong to ask God for spiritual food, but many commentators agree that Jesus' meaning here is concrete and practical. He is addressing the precarious situation of day-laborers in Palestine, whose pay at the end of the working day was just enough to enable their families to eat for another day. According to Borg, bread— enough food— was always an issue for the peasant class, and *there is reason to think that the peasant*

quest for adequate sustenance was becoming even more desperate in the time of Jesus. God's Kingdom . . . is about enough bread.

Commentator, Douglas Hare, poses an important question: *How shall economically secure Western Christians pray such a prayer today? Not by allegorizing the bread and allowing it to stand for all of our material needs. The only authentic way for us to pray this petition is by identifying with the poor, especially those of the third world, for whom subsistence is a daily concern.* It is a very different thing to ask God for our daily bread, only enough to meet our present needs, than to ask for a year's supply of bread and a freezer to put it in. However, if we want an economically just world, a world in which the most basic human needs are met, we must resist the lie of our consumer culture which tells us that, no matter what we have, it is never enough. Jesus tells us to pray for what we need to meet our basic needs— to know what is enough— and to share the remaining abundance with those who have so much less.

In the most commonly used version, the next petition asks God to *forgive us our trespasses*, generally understood to mean our sins, *as we forgive those who trespass against us*. Certainly we want and need God's forgiveness. But does the wording of this petition imply that God's forgiveness is contingent upon *our* willingness to forgive? Will God only forgive us if, and when, we have forgiven those who have sinned against us?

One of my New Testament professors, who was an expert in the languages of the Bible, believed that the translation of the Aramaic, in this petition, should read "so that" rather than "as." That is, we should say, *Forgive us our sins so that we can forgive others*. His grammatical argument was too specialized for me to follow. But he has a certain point. For many of us, it is only when we recognize our own sins, and seek and accept God's forgiveness, that we are freed to forgive others. The reconciliation we seek with God, when we ask God to forgive us, can't really happen as long as we hold on to an injury or a grudge, unwilling to forgive another.

In the contemporary translation, in our New Revised Standard Version bibles, both Matthew and Luke use the word "debts," as you do when you pray the Lord's Prayer. The understanding that this petition is about our sins is time-honored and useful— Borg notes that this *is an excellent teaching, and the world is better when it is observed. But it may also be too much of a spiritualization of the notion of "debt."* In the context in which Jesus taught this prayer, debt was a primary survival issue of peasant life. Many had been forced into debt through excessive Roman taxation, and this had led to the loss of their small subsistence farms and even to being sold into indentured labor. *Thus the [Lord's Prayer] names the two central material concerns of peasant life in the time of Jesus*, Borg writes. *The coming of God's Kingdom involves bread and debt forgiveness.* This understanding undergirds the actions of those who demonstrate against the exorbitant interest rates charged by "pay-day" lenders who prey upon the poor, and those who work for debt forgiveness for impoverished third-world nations.

Our final petition asks for God's presence and action at times of temptation and trial: *Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* I've always thought that it was a little strange to ask

God not to lead us into temptation. Most of the things that tempt me have nothing to do with God, and I don't really believe God takes pleasure in trying to trick us into sin. As the letter of James insists: *Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.* (James 1:13-14) It makes more sense to understand this petition, as Christians have generally understood it, as saying, "Grant me the strength to resist temptation." We also ask God to deliver us from evil— to be with us, and to help us to free ourselves, whenever we find ourselves in the grip of all that is contrary to God's love.

Jesus ended the prayer at this point. We add a doxology— a short hymn of praise, which expresses our belief that God's sovereignty, power, and glory, are from everlasting to everlasting, and that these constitute the completely dependable ground of our faith, our being, and our prayer: *For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.*

Amen.