

Low carb diets and gluten-free needs may have altered the image of bread as being the central food symbol of life and wholeness. This morning, I would invite us to recapture the understanding of bread as both a physical and symbolic image of life, as we study the Lord’s Prayer in Luke’s Gospel.

When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, bread is at the center of both the model prayer he offers and the explanatory parable he tells. Bread will be linked with trust, and Jesus’ listeners will recall when Israel was wandering in the wilderness, worried about what they would eat, and God sent what was called manna each day. Each family was to gather as much manna as it needed for the day – no less, no more. Take too much and you would wake up to moldy, wormy manna. Give us each day our daily bread involves daily trust.

In the parable Jesus tells, bread is also about friends and the practice of hospitality. In the households of Jesus’ day bread was eaten at most meals and baked daily, often in a communal oven shared by other families. As we prepare to hear the parable, picture a neighborhood where houses are close together and windows open. A knock at one door will likely be heard by neighbors a few houses down. And if that knock and talk is at midnight, it is going to wake folks up. For those who recall life in a college dorm, or any who have been awakened by people talking in a hotel hallway in the middle of the night, you have the picture. When Jesus tells of one who knocks on the door of a friend at midnight, much of the neighborhood is going to hear it.

The one knocking has had unexpected guests drop in, for whom there is an obligation to offer hospitality and food. Yet, he is out of bread and asks to borrow three loaves. Jesus reasons out the scene for his disciples, but they and we soon discover the parable is about more than a request for bread. Jesus’ parable is still answering the disciples request for him to teach them to pray.

Our lesson is Luke’s Lord’s Prayer, shorter than the version we pray each Sunday, which is based on Matthew’s Gospel. The difference is likely how the prayer developed within different faith communities. Luke 11:1-13.

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’² He said to them, ‘When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ *Give us each day our daily bread.*

⁴ *And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.’*

And Jesus said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread;⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.”⁷ And he answers from within,

“Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are, with me, in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.”

⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

Some know I enjoy woodworking. My father always had a workshop, and I recall watching him cut wood on the table saw and piece it together. Pretty much the limit of what I was allowed to do around the power tools was pull the handle on the drill press. I don't even recall asking my father, "Dad, teach me to use the table saw," often considered the most essential and most dangerous tool in the wood shop. I imposed that same limit with our children, and now our grandchildren. I will say, after our five year old grandson recently helped me make some outdoor deck tables by pulling the handle on the drill press, he did say something about it being a bit boring. Perhaps fifty drilled holes was too much for a five year old.

I sometimes sense boring is how we may feel about prayer, though unless we are five years old, we probably dare not say it. Jesus' disciples have witnessed him praying. They ask him to teach them to pray, but with an added phrase, "Teach us to pray as John taught his disciples." In Jesus' time, teachers taught their disciples model prayers. In so doing, it offered an identity with and link to one's teacher. One could tell if one was a disciple of Jesus or John or someone else by the prayer one said. As the Church grew, creeds are thought to have taken the place of model prayers, yet the Lord's Prayer has lived on through two millenia. [Gonzalez, Justo, Luke, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) p. 143.]

The Lord's Prayer is our prayer – it is distinctive, and a remnant of Jesus' original teaching embedded in our lives and locked in our memories. We continue to pray the prayer Jesus taught his disciples.

If I had asked my father to teach me how to use a table saw, and he had agreed, it would have been a step by step process with careful monitoring. Notably, Jesus did not offer tips or mechanics, a secret technique or special style, nor did he send the disciples away with a prayer instruction manual. He also did not say, "fold your hands, bow your head, take three deep breaths, center your heart, clear your mind." He was not teaching the disciples how to pray, but to pray. He gave them a prayer that when spoken would remind them of who and whose they were.

These days there is some concern about the use of the gender specific, "Our Father" to begin the prayer, particularly for those whose paternal relationship was difficult or missing. I acknowledge this concern and alternatives that may be helpful; yet, the parental image Jesus offers is less about authority and obedience, and more about relationship – and thus encompasses love, nurture, mercy, delight. I also think of the opening words as Jesus bringing the disciples into a parallel, parental relationship as Jesus himself has with God. It is also a communal prayer. It does not begin, "My Father," but "Our Father."

The hallowing of God's name is an expression of hope in the kingdom coming – not any kingdom, not any national power or greatness, but God's kingdom. It is a phrase of both present possibility and future hope – “Your kingdom come.” Luke does not include Matthew's, “on earth as it is in heaven,” but the prayer moves to daily needs on earth, where faithful kingdom living is to take place. “Give us – each day – our daily bread.” As I noted in my introduction, this is a request based on trust. God is able to provide, and God has promised daily bread. In saying the prayer, I am saying I trust there will be bread for today and I needn't hoard loaves for tomorrow. That's not in the prayer, but it is often where we fall short, perhaps thinking God's bakery could use a little help. We call it stockpiling, or planning for a rainy day. God and Jesus might well call it hoarding. When we do so, it is likely not because we are selfish or greedy, but simply fearful and lacking full trust that God can and will provide our daily bread.

If the first few phrases of the prayer seem to be about a God and me, God and us, relationship, Jesus soon links the prayer to human interactions. “And forgive us our sins” – that's a good request to make to God, but then comes the clincher – “for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. The indebtedness language is purposely inclusive of economic debts another might owe us. Most of the time, when religion or prayers or sermons try to reach into our wallets, we call it meddling. The Lord's Prayer meddles.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Joel Green caught my attention when he coupled forgiveness with the word, “release.” [Green, Joel, The Gospel of Luke, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p.443] It is not new for me to think of forgiveness as release, as being set free from carrying around the weight and burden of those regrets about what we have said we or failed to say, done or failed to do. These not only weigh us down, but can awaken us at night, keep us tense during the day, and inhibit our vitality and effectiveness. I sometimes think the most difficult part about personal forgiveness is not believing God can forgive us, but our reluctance or inability to fully release to God what is burdening us. To let it go. We might even find ourselves mulling over if we are deserving of God's forgiveness; but, we err in thinking that is even our decision to make. God has chosen to forgive.

In both Matthew's and Luke's prayer, God's forgiveness is linked to our forgiving of others, but not in a *quid pro quo* way of if we forgive others, then God will forgive us. In Luke, it is almost stated as a matter of fact practice we already do – “for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.”

I again find it helpful to incorporate the word “release” in this expectation to forgive others. In releasing others from being indebted to us, they are freed from a burden, but as outlandish as that might sound if the person owes us money, releasing the debt can also free our anxiety about it.

Yet, even beyond financial indebtedness, there are coy and manipulative ways we leave others with the feeling, “I owe you one.” Often ill-defined and subtle, we can allow a feeling of indebtedness to linger in the heart and mind of another. I believe this prayer, said regularly, challenges us to keep alert to such subtlety and release any such debt, fully. In so doing, it lifts the burden of indebtedness or dependence we impose on others, even if done unconsciously.

The parable of explanation Jesus offers not only sounds a bit strange, but it is sometimes confusing to reconcile as we begin to parse it out. Sometimes we become caught up in the idea the person knocking at midnight should have had bread on hand, or just made do. Even so, Jesus says, if for no other reason than to stop the knocking and clamor, you arise, answer the door, and provide the bread. You then won't be accused of neglecting hospitality, and the neighbors can go back to sleep.

Then, to summarize, Jesus says in prayer with God, you can ask, knock, and seek at any time. Not only that, but "*everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.*" Not just the faithful, or the worthy or responsible, but everyone has access to God. Jesus adds the common sense examples that if asked for a fish or egg, a parent does not give a snake or scorpion. God, the Father, the parent, provides the daily bread that is needed.

Now I understand there is a whole sermon that could be spent on those times we ask and do not receive, search and do not find, or knock and find the door locked. I have addressed this in other sermons, and don't have time to branch out into what we often term unanswered prayer, but for today, I would simply suggest it is not because we don't have enough faith, or pray in the wrong way. If anything, it may have to do with our lack of trust in daily bread; yet again, even that is too simplistic. Still, it is the very simplicity of the Lord's Prayer that can be instructive.

I have owned a table saw for almost forty years. I have not had a major injury, though there were things I did when first using the saw I would never do today. I was lucky. I could say blessed, but I tend to think when you try something stupid and survive, it is more luck. There are also more, safe, things I can do today with a table saw that I have learned over the years. Practice and experience have a way of providing wisdom to know what one can do, and what one should never attempt on a table saw.

I think the same can be said with prayer. Practice and experience does not necessarily make one a better pray-er than someone else – it is not a competition – but it enables one to sense the range of God's grace and the presence of God's Holy Spirit. These days, in my prayer, I am seeking to envision a very personal God sitting in a chair or across a table from me – a real in-the-room, face-to-face presence, always listening, sometimes speaking. I also find it helpful to regularly come back to Jesus' foundational prayer, which we call the Lord's Prayer, to touch base with our call to trust and forgive.

When we do, when we pray the Lord's Prayer regularly, sometimes turning to Luke's shorter version so it does not become rote, then I believe we can rediscover:

God desires to be in a close, familial relationship with us.

God provides daily bread – and I am to live my life trusting that to be true.

God forgives, desiring to release me from sin's burdens – and I am to live my life recognizing ways I need to offer forgiveness and release to others.

The Lord's Prayer is our prayer.

When we say it, we show we belong to Christ.

When we live it, we show we follow Christ.