

Shaped by Prayer

Luke 11:1-13

July 25, 2010; Tim Devine

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I really resonate with the question we heard in the Bible reading today from the anonymous disciple:

"Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

There are times when all we want are just the steps to follow. It's too hard to question. I'm too tired to think. Just tell me what to do. And the Biblical question about teaching the disciples to pray feels like it comes from a similar place.

And Jesus seems to get it. He responds. He gives them a short standard prayer. It is also found in the narrative of the Gospel of Matthew. And it is a pretty amazing thing that it has survived all the way into the present day, and that it is probably the one thing that almost all Christians, and even many people beyond the faith, are familiar with and can often even recite from memory.

Jesus addresses God as "*Father*." And this address may be either comforting or problematic in the present day. But in Jesus' day, there would have been no other way of talking about God. He did use the most familiar name, like "Daddy," which would have been pretty radical at that time – calling the God of creation and power in the most intimate of terms. And today, responding to our own understandings, it says in the prayer time in our worship bulletin to "please use language that is faithful for you."

Maybe the most significant thing we can notice is that the whole prayer is shared in the plural rather than the singular. That just may be another radical shift in our self-absorbed materialistic secular culture. The prayer doesn't say give me what I need, but says "*us*."

In today's culture we are told to ask "Give me today, right now, what I want and think I need and might even believe that I deserve." In the prayer we hear: "*Give us each day our daily bread*." The difference between "me" and "I" versus "us" and "our" is huge.

I've never found the two images that follow the prayer all that helpful in contemporary life. The first image about a neighbor refusing to honor hospitality would have had a very strong response in that ancient honor and shame-based culture. Hospitality was a requirement. Even today, my experience of Palestinian families was that they had fresh bread on hand for the guest or whomever might visit today, and had yesterday's "day-old" bread for the family to eat.

And the images of a parent giving a child a snake or a scorpion is making an assumption that even the least suitable parents provide basic care to their children.

So these images are, in their own way, trying to share with the early listeners that God will be good to them – even better than any earthly neighbor or parent. God will provide hospitality and compassion – not because we are worthy or have the right words or formula, but because it is God’s nature to be generous and loving.

In our Prayer of Confession earlier today we shared in some of the different places where the prayer has diverged over time:

“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” – this is the phrasing that is used at St. Paul’s and is also in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer.

“Forgive us our doing wrong, as we forgive others” – this is from the Contemporary English Version from the American Bible Society, a Bible translated to be more age appropriate for younger people.

“In the hurts that we absorb from one another, forgive us” – this is from the indigenous Maori translation from New Zealand.

And finally – “Loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strand we hold of others’ guilt” – is the English translation from the Syriac-Aramaic Bible still used in a few Middle Eastern communities today.

And these phrases about forgiveness are important. Carrying guilt and anger may be one of the most difficult things that can happen to us. It can almost be like carrying a toxic virus of the spirit. What about when life isn’t fair? What about when we don’t feel that our prayers have been answered? What about when our anger is towards God?

In my own life I’ve found that even when I don’t feel the faith, if I simply go through the motions I give structure to my emptiness. It’s almost like practicing being happy so when that emotion comes back I can be ready.

When my daughter Lauren first developed epilepsy, it was very severe. She was in Boston Children’s Hospital for over a month, and it felt even more cruel to me because she was only three years old. I was pretty clearly angry at God. One evening when things were at their very worst I was in some sub-basement of the hospital, furious by the unfairness of what was happening. Later, after I composed myself and was back up on the floor where Lauren’s room was, her pediatrician was walking towards me.

“Tim,” he said, “I’m glad to see you. I wanted to give you this card. It is a friend of mine, a psychiatrist. What has happened to Lauren has been so devastating that I’ve needed to talk to him so that I can make clear medical decisions on her behalf. I can only imagine how much harder this is for you and Teresa. Please take this and call him, and we can tap resources for payment if you need.”

I didn’t get what I was praying for, but I did get what I needed.

And today, twenty years later, I can still take comfort in that encounter. I've treated it almost as if he became the hero in a fairy tale. And I've carried with me ever since the conviction that no matter what, we would somehow get through this. And I believe that Lauren has had the best life we could offer her from our particular set of circumstances.

Today's scripture passage asks us to visualize asking, searching, and knocking. When we do so we are being shaped by prayer. If we don't ask then we will never receive. And if we can move through our own heartbreak, we may just find that even though we might not get what we've asked for, it might just be what we need.

May we find the confidence to ask, to search, and to knock. For when we persist in prayer, no matter what the outcome, we do move forward in faith, in hope, and in love. Amen.

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.” He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

And he 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; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ 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.’ I 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. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If 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!”