

The Lord's Prayer ... What If?
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
August 2, 2009
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Psalm 32:5-7
Matthew 6:7-13

Have you ever thought that coming to church might be a dangerous act?

If not, that's only reasonable. We come here to be comforted by the embrace of friends, the warmth of the sanctuary and the beauty of the architecture. We come here to be soothed by familiar hymns, to be lifted up by our choir, to delight on the joyful presence of our children and to hear a reassuring word of scripture.

Most of all, we come here to kneel before our God and to be renewed by God's promise of grace.

If anything, worship is repetitious ... and, in part, that's the way we like it. Here at Caldwell, we aim for a balance of the parts of worship that we know by heart along with those that are fresh and unexpected ... which we get on a regular basis. There is one thing, though, that we do each and every week ... pray the Lord's Prayer.

I can't remember when I first learned the Lord's Prayer. Maybe your memory is better when it comes to your experience.

Three of the four gospel accounts of the life of Christ tell the story – that Christ taught the disciples the prayer after they asked him how to pray. The Gospel of Matthew elaborates, including the scene in the great Sermon on the Mount.

For centuries, scholars have broken down the Lord's prayer, translation by translation, and preachers have interpreted it line by line and word by word. Christ offers this prayer as a model for all prayer. Scholar Tom Wright likens its framework to scaffolding on a building. He says it is as much about the structure as the specific words, which explains why the words vary a bit across the gospel accounts.

The prayer gives us balance, symmetry and order. We Presbyterians, who are partly defined by our fondness for St. Paul's instruction that we do everything neatly and in order, take this as one more sign that Jesus really probably was a Presbyterian, at least at heart.

It begins with three statements directed to and focused on God - that God's name be honored, that God's kingdom come and that God's will be done. Then it moves to

petition God for three things we all need and want – sustenance in life, forgiveness for our sins and protection from evil.

Jesus' point to the disciples, as we heard in the scripture reading, was that simple prayer works just as well, if not better, than fancy, high-church prayers. In this way, the Lord's Prayer reaches beyond its specific words to direct us in how to practice not just prayer but our faith ... that we should begin everything in asking what God is doing, then, in turn, humbly ask for God's help as we make our way in the world.

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So, you might ask, where is the danger in that?

As we repeat these familiar words and bring to mind the equally familiar images they conjure up, the Lord's Prayer has become like a baby blanket that we can snuggle with to feel safe and secure.

That brings us to the question that prompts this sermon, another entry in our Summer Sermon Grab Bag.

What if?, the Grab Bag participant asks. What if we actually got all the things we ask for in the Lord's Prayer? How would our lives be different ... how would the world be different ... if the prayer became reality? That's what we mean, after all, when we end it and any prayer with the word "Amen", which is an ancient Hebrew word that means "So be it."

That, my friends, is where it gets dicey for anyone who wants their religion to be only a baby blanket. When I finally was ordained as a pastor after six years of preparation, I said I felt a bit like the dog who loved to chase cars, but didn't know what to do next. Saying the Lord's Prayer is a little like that – like the dog, we have to ask ourselves whether we are up for task?

In their helpful book on the Lord's prayer, the two great pastor-scholars Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas point out that the Lord's Prayer is to be prayed aloud, as a public gesture, a public event. They write:

“ ... this is one of the most defiant, politically charged, public things we Christians can-do – pray the Lord's Prayer. Yet in praying the Lord's Prayer, and in living this prayer, we Christians may seem strange and foreign to the world. Sometimes the world, upon hearing the Lord's Prayer prayed, in front of Caesar's images, on the steps of the court house, before a high school graduation, even in church on a Sunday, has sought to drive Christians out of the world, but that is

the world's doing, an attempt to preclude us from arising out of the world's own insecurity. We have nowhere else to pray this prayer than in the world."¹

What's the danger? Take, for example, the petition, "Your kingdom come, your will be done."

Do we really mean that? Do we really want what that invites - a society where the last are made first – what if we come in first? Do we want a world in which the loyal son gets overlooked in favor of the prodigal? What if we are the loyal son? What about a divinely governed norm that expects us to tear out our right eye if it causes us to sin or a world that insists that we cannot serve God and wealth?

Is this what we want when we say, "So let it be?"

Have you ever really thought about the next petition – "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?"

How are you doing in forgiving all those who have wronged you? Do you really want God's forgiveness to hinge on your track record in forgiving others ... the co-worker who wronged you, the spouse who betrayed you, the sibling, son or daughter whose life is one long drama that robs you of your own life?

This week, we all witnessed one of the more famous beers in recent memory when a Harvard Professor and the policeman who arrested him gathered with the president to talk about what happened. As I am sure you know, the behavior of both the professor and the policeman turned what should have been a routine situation into a racially charged national debate.

President Obama called it "a teachable moment" – and, indeed, our nation could have learned a thing or two about forgiveness. But neither the professor nor the policeman apologized, much less forgave the other. So we see again how hard forgiveness really is ... and how carefully we should go to God in asking for our own.

And what's with all those "us-es" and "ours" in the Lord's Prayer, some might say?

What's in this prayer for me, myself and I?

"I know I deserve my daily bread," we might think, "but I don't know about the guy next to me. If they get theirs, there might not be enough for me tomorrow. Sounds socialist to me!

¹ Lord, Teach Us – The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life, Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas. P. 69

“Why couldn’t Jesus have used the first person singular instead of the plural? Maybe it was just a misprint or a slip of the tongue. Someone should go back and check the record.

“Better yet, you let me worry about getting my bread and you get yours. That’s fair. That way, I can amass more than my daily bread, because daily bread might not be enough. Besides, I am really not dependent on God anyway. I can make my way in the world just fine.

“But, now that I am here, I see that you have laid out communion, the bread that is the body of Christ and the cup, the fruit of the new covenant. While I am here, I will take some of that.

“And, that part about deliver us from evil? There is evil in the world ... anything that separates us from God. So, count me in on that, too, as long as you are going to the trouble, God. I don’t mind being included with the others in that part.”

* * *

You get the point.

So, there are more than a few risks in praying this prayer that lies at the heart of our faith.

The first, as I’ve just rehearsed, is that people of faith try treat it like a cafeteria health plan, signing up for only the parts that we think we need or want at any given time.

A second risk is that we just go through the motions – and count that as enough.

In Matthew’s account of the story of the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus tells the disciples that in praying they should not heap up empty phrases, making a big show of their prayer and petitions without putting their heads and their hearts into it. That’s why Christ gave us this simple prayer, anyway.

But ... even in its simplicity, do we ever pray it with empty heads and hearts? Do we ever mouth the words, like we are lip-syncing, like Milli Vanilli? That’s a risk, too, and it’s OK to admit it.

The gospel demands more from us. The gospel demands that we take the Lord’s Prayer as one piece, whole cloth. In saying it, we are called to participate with God in bringing about the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

And that, again is where it gets dangerous. That’s pretty heady stuff ... that kingdom stuff. It’s not what we think it ought to be – full of as many reprobates, even you and I,

as the kind of upstanding citizens we would expect to find there. But that is who Jesus hung out with. Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas put it well.

To say, “Your kingdom come’ is to be willing to become part of the rather weird gathering of strange people, often people whom the world regards as outsiders, who are now on the inside with Jesus.²

“When you join the Rotary Club,” they go on to write, “they give you a handshake and a membership card. When you join the church, we throw you into water, bathe you, half-drown you, clean you up, and tell you that you have been born again. We thus signify that being a Christian is not natural, not a by-product of being an American. To be Christian is to be adopted by a new nation, the kingdom of God.”³

In our scripture passage from Matthew, Jesus does an odd thing. He tells the disciples that the Lord knows what they need even before they ask. What a curious thing to do right before you give them the words to a prayer.

It can only mean that praying the Lord’s Prayer is as much about the “how” as it is about the “what.” We are being formed by repeating these words, straightened out and strengthened for the dangerous work it asks of us ... to submit the question “What if it were true?” ... and to summons the kingdom and the power and the glory of our sovereign God to bring it about ... even through us.

So, perhaps, friends, as much as anything, we say the Lord’s Prayer as a pledge of allegiance to that new nation, the Kingdom of God, already begun but not nearly finished.

So let it be. Amen.

² P. 55

³ P. 56