

LELC Pentecost 7

The texts today presented a couple of temptations, the biggest being to accidentally let this sermon become a Confirmation lesson on the Lord's Prayer. I'll save that for another day and another context. But the Gospel text begins with Jesus praying and the disciples asking him to teach them to pray. So clearly, the heart of this passage is prayer. There are lots of trite and only semi-true things that can be said about prayer. I will try to avoid as many of those as I can too. But then, where to start?

Let's start with what I think is the heart of prayer – humility. That's right, humility. Prayer starts with the stark and often unhappy realization that you don't have it all together, you can't get it all together, and you need someone, something, some Higher Power (to use that language) to get it together again. Prayer becomes the act of reaching out with one's mind and heart to something beyond ourselves for help. This is probably one of the most powerful aspects of prayer – in that it re-positions us in our relationship to God; and probably just as importantly – to our own egos.

That got me to thinking about the positions we use for prayer. I was taught, and still teach I suppose, “fold your hands, and bow your heads.” It's not bad, or wrong. It certainly gets at the humility part. But that is probably not the position Jesus likely would have used when he prayed. The early Christian art in the catacombs and other such places depict a prayer posture called the “orans” which is standing, elbows bent, arms outstretched, palms up. It is a position of open-ness, receptiveness. It's almost child-like which (if you think about how little kids are when they want something from the grown-ups around) is full of both desire and trust that what they ask for will be provided.

And that is exactly how Jesus frames it. Prayer is like asking a neighbor for help, or a parent providing for a child. We talked back on Trinity Sunday what a radical thing Jesus was doing when he told his disciples to pray “Abba – which had the intimacy of Papa, and the implications of Life-Giving Parent of us all. With “Abba, hallowed be your name” Jesus reminds us of the beyond-ness, the sacred-ness of this Something to which we are so closely connected. We begin with the humbleness of little children.

*Our Father ≠ My ⇒ Our corporate prayer
us*

connected-ness

Notice that the actual words in the Luke text are really short and to the point. “Your kingdom come.” This would be, to those praying, first of all as opposed to the kingdom of Rome. That was the overriding reality in their life. They all longed to

be rid of that corrupt and oppressive reign. But we should note that Jesus is not praying for what most folks of Judea and Galilee would have prayed for. The good folks of that day likely prayed for the Messiah to come, for the military power of a great Son of David to rise up and be victorious in war again and re-establish the kingdom of Israel and Judah. That's not what Jesus is praying, He is saying, "Holy Giver of Life to us all, let your kingdom come. Let your way of love and life and well-being for all come into existence."

Then there are three very specific things Jesus directs his disciples to pray for. All of them are very practical things to help them get through life in the meantime – until God's kingdom is finally fully realized.

One: give us bread for today. It's an acknowledgment of our physical being and our physical needs. It's good and right to ask for enough. Though we should note it is bread for today. Not for the indefinite future. And it is "Give US OUR daily bread," and not "give ME MY daily bread" There is an unavoidable collectiveness we pray for when we pray the prayer Jesus taught us.

Two: "Forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." This is a topic that we could spend a lot more time on, so for now, suffice it to say Jesus is teaching them to ask for help in meeting their relational needs. They were forming communities of faith to try to live out following Jesus. And in community there will always be need for the mending and tending of relationships because there will always be the hard feelings and misunderstandings of life together. It's okay to pray for God and God's love for us all to help us do that.

But notice that that is different from the third and last thing Jesus tells them to pray for: Do not bring us to the time of trial. I don't think Jesus was talking about Snickers bars there. I think Jesus was telling his followers that it is okay to want to be protected from the prosecution they would face at the hands of those caught up in the systemic evil of their day. In our liturgical version we even say, "Deliver us from evil." It is okay to want to be delivered from the evil that occurs when collective greed and hatred and fear gain power and target the vulnerable and any who would stand their way.

By contrast, I want to point out three things that Jesus does not teach them to pray. Jesus do not teach them to pray for escape from the harsh realities of the world. In Jesus' time there were a group of folks who lived out in the caves around the Dead Sea waiting is austere safety for God to make the world right again. Jesus is not

teaching them to pray (or live) for that. Jesus does not teach them to pray for their own rise to power. There is not even a hint of “Let us be the big deals because we will be better than those guys are.” Human is human is human. Jesus knew that, even if his disciples didn’t. And lastly, and perhaps most striking, Jesus does not teach them to pray for God to destroy their enemies. This is a huge shift from what would have been commonplace for any semi-religious person who knew at least a few psalms. Over and over in the psalms there are lines about God destroying the enemy or the evil-doers. So it is a pretty big deal that Jesus does not include anything about that. Whether we realize it or not, when we pray this prayer we are affirming that no one is outside of the need for God’s love, forgiveness, and wise providing.

It is simply a prayer for what is needed to keep going, to keep being faithful, and to trust that God is at work in the midst of all they did for the good of all people and all creation.

I don’t know if at your house you spent in time these last 2 or 3 weeks paying attention to the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing. But we did at our house. (Yes, I’m married to a geek, God love ‘em) I know I’m not as taken by the same things as my husband is. He is more attuned to the science and engineering of it all. I’m more attuned to the poetry and spirituality of it all. I think the events of those days changed the human psyche, just a bit. We were allowed just a glimpse of seeing ourselves as God sees us (to use one of the astronauts words).

I’ve thought often of the images of how the world watched, with all but maybe a very few, holding their collective breath, waiting, hoping, praying for a successful mission and their safe return. I can think of very few other moments like this in human history. When all the barriers between us are transcended and we earthlings were united in a shared concern. It illuminates our common humanity. It leads me to think that this prayer Jesus taught us that we say almost without thinking is missing something when we focus too much on the specificity of Jesus instead of the universality of what he was teaching us to pray for.

Maybe the truest thing is that Jesus was teaching us all to humble ourselves before the Giver of Life, recognizing that that Giver of life, and perhaps Life itself, is holy. And that we let the ways of love reign, both in our hearts and in the world. That there be enough for all. That we be able to mend our relationships. And that we be spared the suffering that we, in our human broken-ness, inflict on one another. To which one can only say, Amen, Amen. Let it be so. Let it be so. Amen.