

Christianity 101: The Lord's Prayer

Matthew 6:5-14

(Last in a four part sermon series on foundations of the Christian faith)

Palisades Community Church

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The idea of “prayer” has always been, for me, laden with both mystery and respect.

First, its “mystery”:

Where is the Being to whom I pray? Is it so necessary to render prayerful thoughts into actual words? What response might I reasonably and rightfully expect from such spiritual communication? Is prayer credible if a desired result is achieved, but a futile exercise if an expressed hope fails to materialize? If prayer is conversation—both speaking and listening--how do I know when I should be speaking and when I should be listening? Is to say “God bless you”, to say a prayer?

Second, the matter of “respect”:

Who is the Being to whom I pray: God? Jesus? Lord? Holy Spirit? All of them in One? Is it right to appeal to God only at a time of unexpected or critical need, as if making a 911 call? Does God smile or frown with end zone demonstrations of garish gratitude? Does God ever feel used or abused as a last resort? Is God satisfied with an articulate prayer, or does God prefer an intimate relationship? Is scheduled prayer as meaningful as spontaneous prayer? Is it discriminatory to say “God bless America”?

It is when the “mystery” and the “respect” have intersected that I have discovered the essence of prayer, which I believe is “privilege” for a person of faith.

A few winters back, popular young Alex made a mistake, and it cost him his life. Behind the wheel with a car full of buddies one early Sunday morning, he drove too fast on a slick curve in Montgomery County. Thirty-six hours later, I found his father to be the lone watch guard at Alex's bedside in the critical care unit at DC's Children's Hospital. A Christian pastor and a Jewish dad, nominal friends then and now, respectfully prayed together through the mystery. The hope expressed in the dark of that night did not materialize. Yet, for two persons of faith, a moment of "spiritual privilege" is not forgotten.

It strikes me that prayer as "spiritual privilege" is what Jesus was intent upon teaching, as recorded in the Gospel attributed to Matthew.

He rebuked the practice of pompous priests who relished their public's attention: *"Do not be like the hypocrites...who love to be seen by others."*

He rebuked the Gentiles' habit of repeating lengthy, complicated prayers with the purpose of gaining the favor of one of the many gods or goddesses of their pagan culture: *"Do not heap up empty phrases."*

Better off to pray behind a closed door, in secret: *"Your Father knows what you need before you ask him."* A critical care room at DC's Children's Hospital will do.

Jesus learned from John the Baptist the form of the prayer that he taught to his disciples. It appears also in the Gospel attributed to Luke, though in a modified version. According to N. T. Wright, noted New Testament scholar, prolific author, and a Bishop in the Church of England, what Jesus has provided in the prayer so at home in the hearts of Pentecostals and Presbyterians alike is a *framework* for universal prayer: more like a

scaffolding, Wright says, than a *whole building*. Here are some elements in the “*framework*”:

Jesus implies that we can and should use ordinary language in talking with the creator of the universe. The words we utter have the same meaning for God as for us.

Jesus invokes the title “*Father*” for God, a reflection of the relationship understood by the Jews ever since God’s action in saving Israel at the Exodus. I have acknowledged for a long time my discomfort with the concept of God as “*Father*”, for fear of burdening yet another generation of children with gender exclusiveness that will only later have to be unlearned. But that is another sermon for another time.

Back to the *framework*:

Jesus reminds that God is a *living* God who longs to see the glory and beauty of heaven turned into reality in the earthly transactions of the human family: “*Thy Kingdom com on earth, as it is in Heaven!*”

So the first part of the Lord’s Prayer is about the nature of God. The second part is about us, and what we may without reservation ask of God because, as our Creator, God cares about our needs even more than we do ourselves.

Yes, we request *bread*, knowing that the appeal is for not only ourselves, but also for the starving millions in the world—knowing that in the asking is the commitment to help make the world more just for everyone.

Yes, we request *forgiveness*, knowing that the appeal is for not only this one time, but for as frequently as our shortcomings persist—knowing that the heart that is not open to forgiving others is the heart that is closed to welcoming the forgiveness of God

Yes, we request *deliverance* from situations that would test our faithfulness— knowing that Jesus met and overcame such circumstances, and knowing that when we are so challenged in our darkest hours, we are expected to follow in his footsteps.

As recorded in the Gospels attributed to Matthew and Luke, Jesus has provided a *framework* for universal prayer--more like a *scaffolding* than a *whole building*. As it has evolved in congregational traditions like our own, the *framework* supports the sequential flow of prayerful worship from Praise to Invocation to Confession to Petition to Intercession to Thanksgiving to Benediction. Sunday after Sunday. Whenever two or three are gathered.

On the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem, the Convent of “Pater Noster” (“Our Father”) stands on the site where Jesus taught his disciples how to pray. In the Convent’s cloister, on ceramic tiles lining the walls, the Lord’s Prayer is inscribed in forty-four different languages. I was inspired by the intersection of mystery and respect as only “The Lord’s Prayer” can evoke as I walked the cloister some thirty years ago.

I was similarly inspired every time I listened to my mother sing “The Lord’s Prayer” by Albert Hay Malotte in the sanctuaries of my childhood.

And I was equally inspired every time I listened to “The Lord’s Prayer” sung so passionately by my brother, deceased four years ago this month.

And so I was naturally inspired as I listened to “The Lord’s Prayer” sung so poignantly by a friend at a memorial service in Illinois eight days ago.

And thanks to Connie and Simone, I expect to be so inspired this morning.

It is when “mystery” and “respect” intersect that we discover the essence of prayer, which I believe is “privilege” for a person of faith.