

“Teach Us to Pray”

Some events etch themselves in our memories. It was twenty-two years ago now that my son from my first marriage, Eric, lived for a year with Priscilla and our boys and me in Omaha. Eric was sixteen at the time, Jonathan was five, and Paul was only two. One evening I was sitting in the living room and pretending to read the paper while Eric was trying to teach the younger boys to play Hide and Seek. The five year old Jonathan got the hang of it pretty quickly. He learned to find a place to hide where it would be at least a little bit difficult to find him. He got the idea that this is mostly a battle of wits, and he has always been well-equipped in that department. He would sneak off and slither under a bed or behind a couch or into the empty bathtub behind the shower curtain.

But two year old Paul was another matter altogether. Eric would show Paul how to hide, and try to get him to do it. Paul would agree. But when Eric would hide his head and begin to count, Paul would stand within six feet of him and shriek with delight, because he knew that whenever this mysterious thing called “counting” ended, somebody was going to come looking for him, and he didn’t want to miss a moment of the excitement. His big brother was going to come looking for him! Why would he want to ruin it by running away? Aware that Paul had not left to hide, Eric would stop his counting and say, with great patience, “Paul, you’ve got to go run and hide, and then I’ll try to find you.” Paul would squeal with delight, and say with excitement, “OK!”... and then he would stay right where he was and wait to be found. When Eric looked up, Paul would laugh and run right to him. You should have seen Paul’s face, all lit up like the fourth of July. He loved to play Hide and Seek... it was easily his favorite game.

Of course, Paul didn’t get the point. Or did he? Jesus’ saying that we must receive the Reign of God as children makes more sense to me every day. Is it more fun to cower in a closet in the solitary satisfaction of how smart you are; or to run to the embrace of somebody who is looking for you?

I think we get it backwards sometimes: valuing the satisfaction of competence in things religious—theology, ritual, even moral righteousness—over the sheer and simple joy of reunion. In this morning’s lesson Jesus offers his disciples—and us—the assurance that God craves

intimacy with us even more than we crave intimacy with God. And he teaches us how to pray: not the precise words to use so much as the approach to take so that when God comes looking for us we will be out in the open and easy to find.

As our lesson begins, Jesus has been praying. This is not unusual in Luke; Jesus disappears for extended periods of prayer. He often emerges from them with a renewed sense of calm and a striking clarity of purpose. The disciples have seen this happen over and over. So when they say to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray,” they may really be saying, “Show us how to have the sort of relationship with God that you have.” Great spiritual leaders teach their followers spiritual practices to help them grow closer to God. John the Baptist evidently did this for his followers; Jesus’ disciples want the same.

Jesus responds to this request by offering his disciples what tradition has come to call the Lord’s Prayer. In many Christian communities a version of it is spoken nearly every time people gather for worship. So before we say too much more we should acknowledge some difficulties about the Lord’s Prayer.

The temptation is to compare different versions, explore variations in the ancient manuscripts and note how translations diverge. But while that’s perhaps interesting enough in its own right, that sort of analysis won’t help us much with today’s lesson. We quickly get frustrated learning that there really is no single authorized version of the prayer; that variations were apparently employed in the early Church and these differences crept into even the earliest ancient manuscripts; that disputes over words like “debts” and “trespasses” are more historical accidents than anything else; and yet our different groups cling to the way we were taught as though the words themselves were sacred and only our version were instituted by Jesus. The truth is that there is no single precisely correct version, and the search for such is an historical wild goose chase that can distract us from looking at the intent of the prayer. We’re not going there today. Nor will we explore the eschatological dimensions of the Lord’s Prayer as unique to a community that believed it was living in the last days: not today.

Instead, let’s return to the lesson and “play it as it lies.” Luke offers us a version of the Lord’s Prayer that is reduced to its most basic elements. We can identify six such elements to begin with; later we’ll boil them down to three, and then to one.

Jesus begins with the word, “Father.” On a continuum of titles from familiar to formal, this is at the extremely familiar end as a means of address for the God whose Hebrew name is too holy to be spoken. Rather than approaching God on our knees, head bowed and eyes averted, Jesus is telling us to scramble up into God’s lap. This encourages us to approach God without fear, without guile, without pretense or posturing. Prayer will not be a technical challenge requiring us to measure our words or get the ritual just right.

“Hallowed be your name,” the prayer continues. God is holy. God is God and we are not. But God welcomes us as would a loving parent.

“Your kingdom come,” is next. Matthew’s version elaborates on that thought by continuing, “thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” This is crucial. We often approach prayer as though the purpose of prayer were to get God to align with our will: to get God to do what we want. But the real purpose of prayer is to get our lives to align with God’s will. We don’t pray in order to shape God, but so that God might shape us.

“Give us each day our daily bread.” Life can be an anxious enterprise. We never come to God unburdened. There are things on our minds, things in our hearts, things that we need or think we need. This simple entreaty to free us from worry about where the next meal is coming from is an expression of trust in the goodness of God and the sufficiency of God’s good creation. It invites us to set our worry aside and to let go.

“And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” Broken relationships make for broken selves. When we are estranged from others, we are estranged from God. We can’t love God and at the same time despise our brothers and sisters in whose faces God is revealed to us. Forgiveness heals. We need to forgive not just for the sake of others, but because of the cost to us of carrying around a burden of corrosive bitterness. Righteous anger can seem to be energizing, life-giving. We feed on the idea of looking down on another in judgment; but it’s spiritual junk food and it tears us up. We cannot receive forgiveness if we cannot forgive. We can’t both cling to animosities and open our arms to embrace God.

The conclusion in Luke sounds odd: “And do not bring us to the time of trial.” This sixth and final element really brings us full circle. It acknowledges our need to be received not in judgment, but in accepting, forgiving love. As the psalmist writes, “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, LORD, who would stand?” God, if you’re keeping score, none of

us is worthy of your love. But Jesus is saying that growing closer to God isn't about earning our intimacy, but receiving God's welcome. It's hide and seek, and we're the ones being sought.

That point is reinforced in the mini-parables that follow—really a series of images with similar messages. The pattern is to argue from the lesser to the greater: if even human beings know how to be gracious, how much more will God, who needs no urging to do good, be gracious to us.

You go to a friend at midnight asking for bread so that you can extend hospitality to an unexpected guest. Even a reluctant neighbor will come through if you persist in asking. Won't God do even more?

Ask... search... knock: God will answer, be revealed and open to you. Notice that this does not say that God will always and in every instance give us precisely what we ask for; but God will give. We know how to give good things to our children—and of course even we don't always give them what they ask for—did you ever get that pony you wanted when you were six? How much more then will God give us good things, and the greatest gift of all, the Holy Spirit, which is the gift of God's own presence living among us and within us. Those who approach prayer with a genuine eagerness to know God will receive their heart's desire.

So the passage boils down to the assurance that God wants intimacy with us. The trick in prayer is not to have any tricks. The challenge is to get ourselves out of the way.

1. Trust God. Approach God as a tender, loving parent, seeking not to control or manipulate but to allow our lives to become expressions of God's loving will.

2. Don't be anxious about your needs. Acknowledge them in prayer, but don't reduce prayer to begging and getting. Sometimes our need is so great that it takes a long time for us to acknowledge it and to let go of our desperation. That's OK. Think of Jesus praying in Gethsemane, asking that the cup of suffering might pass from him. He is so distraught that he is literally sweating blood.¹ But he concludes with the words, "yet not my will, but yours be done."

3. If we want to be reconciled to God, we must seek reconciliation with others. We have to try to live the love we want to have at the center of our lives.

¹ See Luke 22:44.

Trust... unburden and align... forgive: and it all comes back around to trust. That's how Jesus teaches us to pray: not a magic formula to recite but a means to getting ourselves out of the way so that God can find us.

Ally ally oxen free.²

Amen

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² Internet sources tell me that this saying from the end of a Hide and Seek game, which basically means everybody can come home comes from "All ye outs in free." Hence the spelling with an "A."