

Pentecost 7, July 24, 2022 (Lk 11:1-13; Gen 18:20-32; Ps 138)

This is a teaching sermon.

Before I went to seminary and began to study the Bible and the meaning of faith, this is what I really meant when I prayed the Lord's Prayer:

My Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. . . . Give me each day my daily bread. . . . Forgive me my sins and I'll think about forgiving those who sin against me.

Not exactly what Jesus meant, is it? You can tell from the very first word—*my*—how badly I'd corrupted this prayer Jesus gave to a whole community. Like everything else in the teachings and preaching of Jesus, it's the *community*, not the individual, that's the focus.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, these were the words he gave them according to Luke. Whether we use the traditional or the contemporary version, I suspect that often when we pray it together in worship week after week, we pray it as a group of individuals—using the same words but asking on behalf of our individual selves, rather than on behalf of the body of Christ here at St. John/St. Stephen, and the communion of saints throughout the world.

My pastoral colleague, Brian Stoffregen, observes that *many* people seem to pray as if they were putting coins in a vending machine. We put our prayer in the slot for what we want, push the right button, and wait for our divine vending machine to spit out exactly what we ordered. *I've* done that, I know. Have you?

But God isn't a divine vending machine. God is our *Father*—the Father of *all* of us. The way Jesus addressed God, as *Abba*, is the intimate name, *Daddy*. That trusting intimacy with which Jesus addressed his Father extends to us, because Jesus died to make us his sisters and brothers in God's sight.

The shorter Lord's Prayer according to Luke describes our *relationship* with God in a nutshell—and *relationship* is what it's all about. Lutheran theologian William Willimon wrote these words. Listen carefully! And be prepared to disagree!

Religion is the assignment that you are given by God in order for you to keep close to God. We come to church to think, believe, feel, and behave in the right ways, so that God will love us.

Right?? If at first you agreed, think again. Listen on:

The Bible, especially Jesus, reveals the heart of a God who passionately loves, forgives, seeks, finds, waits, pleads, and saves. Time and again this God forgives. Relentlessly this God does not just sit back waiting for us to come to our senses and return to relationship. This. . . is the long-suffering [God] who is willing to be in pain for the sake of us. This God hounds us until we turn, return, repent, relinquish, and come back (Daily Feast, C, p. 395).

Do you hear the difference between the two approaches to “religion”? Or maybe we should say, between “religion” and “faith”? God never tells us what to do to make him love us. Instead, God always makes the first move of intimate love, wooing us to love him back *because* he first loved us. Only then does he *command* us to love others as he loves us.

I need to point out that in almost every translation or version of the Lord's Prayer, one line should make us pause every time we pray it: **forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who sins against us.** Or, in Matthew's version, **forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.**

Do you hear what *God* hears when we pray these words? We're asking *God* to forgive *us* in the same way we forgive those who sin or trespass against *us*. If you're holding a grudge, or waiting for someone to apologize first, maybe you'd better not pray verse four of this prayer that Jesus taught us.

Throughout the last 2000 years there have been countless translations and versions of the Lord's Prayer. Most of us grew up with what's called the "traditional" version. It's nice to have the comfort of words you learned as a child. Change is hard—traditionally, Lutherans don't *want* to change. But if you look at the various interpretations and translations of the Lord's Prayer, doesn't it make you wonder which is closest to what Jesus really prayed in Aramaic 2000 years ago?

I invite you to take home the handout and read through the different translations of the Lord's Prayer. The King James Version has been prayed since the sixteenth century with only minor changes. In contrast, *The Message* is a decade-old interpretation of the entire New Testament by contemporary writer Eugene Peterson. Which speaks most clearly to your heart? to your head?

Regardless of what words you say, the bottom line of the Lord's Prayer is that Jesus, our Lord, taught it to his disciples so they could pray as he himself prayed. What a wonderful way to offer praise and thanks to God, by giving back the words he first gave to us!

Amen.