July 28. 2019

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”

 Psalm 138 ~ Colossians 2:6-15 ~ Luke 11:1-13

The summer our former pastor’s son turned 14 he played on an AAU basketball team sponsored by the local Catholic high school.  Besides the usual enjoyment of getting to see him play against good competition, the summer also provided a couple of moments that amused our pastor David, if not his son.  The first was the confused looks on the Catholic boys’ faces when he, wearing his standard work clothes of black shirt and minister’s collar, showed up to pick up his son after practice.  It was not hard to read their minds, “But, but – a priest can’t be married!  A priest can’t have children!” He left it up to their coach to explain things.  The other amusing thing was the team’s practice of praying the “Our Father,” what we Protestants usually call “The Lord’s Prayer,” right before tip-off.  Any of you with any experience with Catholic worship know that their prayer ends at “deliver us from evil.”  They do not include the line, “For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.”

Before the tip-off of their first game, the team gathered to pray, and when all the other boys stopped you could hear his son’s lone voice continuing, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever.”  He looked around, then he looked up in the stands at his dad with a quizzical look on his face.  On the ride home, he asked David about it.  He told him that the Roman Catholics were being more faithful to the text than Protestants … that they only said what was in the gospel of Matthew. The “Doxology” (the kingdom and the power and the glory line) has been used in the Eastern Christianity since the second or third century, and it came into English Protestant worship through Thomas Cranmer and the first Book of Common Prayer.

So, at the next game, they prayed again.  At the end of the prayer, habit took over once again and his son continued praying, and then tapered off, an embarrassed look on his face.  Later that week David walked by the door to his son’s room and heard him practicing the Our Father, ending carefully at “deliver us from evil.”  At the third game, the team prayed, the team stopped at “deliver us from evil;” David’s son continued, “For thine is the Kingdom, and the . . . OH SHOOT!”

I have reflected on that moment frequently since David told that story from the pulpit. See, I’m not the only preacher who victimizes their loved ones for sermon fodder.  It has led me to think about two things. One is the power of liturgy … the strength of a prayer learned and engrained … good and appropriate words that stay with us.  I was once at the bedside of a man who had been in a comma for days. I recited the Lord’s prayer using the words that we used in the church I was serving, saying, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” I couldn’t have been more surprised when he corrected me, uttering “trespasses.” His family told me it was the one and only word that he spoke until his death the next day, and you can be sure I used the word “trespasses” when I officiated his funeral.

Duke Divinity School Professors Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas say that their book on the Lord’s Prayer, Lord, Teach Us, “presents the Christian faith not as a set of beliefs but rather as a prayer you must *learn* to pray.” I grew up among people whose religious tradition included “written prayers,” or regular forms of worship repeated week after week; but even my friends who attended the most independent, free-wheeling Baptist churches knew the Twenty-third Psalm, the Lord’s Prayer, and John 3:16 by heart.  Why? Because once these “prayers,” become embedded in our minds, they seep out into our hearts, our souls and our lives.

 The second thing that came to mind is the importance of persistence, especially when disappointed in prayer … the need to continue praying when the only true thing coming out of the abundance of our hearts is a sense of failure and futility … an “OH SHOOT!” moment.

Martin Luther once observed that to be a sinner was to be bent, crooked, twisted.  Bent in on oneself, unable to see either God or the neighbor as serving any other purpose than serving *our* needs, fixing *our* problems, saving *our* souls, improving *our* lives.  The sinner’s first thought is, “What do I get out of it, how does it help me.”

By contrast, good prayers, good liturgy, the Lord’s Prayer, turn our attention away from me and mine toward God and neighbor. This is what I think of when we sing the hymn “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” … “hearts unfold like flowers before you, opening to the sun above.” The first thing the Lord’s Prayer does is unbend us, lift us away from our narcissistic navel-gazing so that we might look up to God and around at the God’s world and at God’s people who fill it.

In our text, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. It is unfortunate that English does not have an official second person plural pronoun, so I’ll have to translate Jesus reply into “Texas” English. Now, as anyone who grew up in Texas knows, “ya’ll” is singular … “*all* ya’ll” is the second person plural pronoun. So, what the verse would have said in Texas speak was, “He said to them, ‘When *all* y’all pray . . .’ The point is … this is not a personal prayer … it is a communal prayer, a community prayer, a prayer we pray together, a prayer that leads us to consider things we do with … and for each other … in our relationship with God.

The prayer tells us that God is close to us … and yet greater than we are … *"Our* ***Fathe****r … who art* ***in*** *Heaven."* The prayer leads us to take God seriously … that when we talk to God, we are standing on holy ground … *"****Hallowed*** *be thy name."* The prayer turns our hearts towards God's best intentions … *"****Thy*** *kingdom come* (not ours) … ***thy*** *will be done* (not mine)." The prayer seeks just enough resources to get the day's work done for God … "*Give us* ***this*** *day our daily bread*" (no more, no less). And because our relationship with God is mirrored in our relationships to one another, and because we need each other … even though we can barely get along … the prayer tells us that we must learn to pray, "*Forgive us our trespasses …* ***as we*** *forgive those who have trespassed against us*."

The prayer places us in the cosmic drama of danger and deliverance … "*Lead us, not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*." Though not in the Lucan version, but in the form most of us have memorized … the prayer ends where it begins … where we begin … humbling ourselves and submitting to the Guide who is beyond us … but among us and within us: "*For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory forever*." "Forever" is a word which doesn't belong to us, of course. "Forever" isn't within our mortal reach. "Forever" belongs exclusively to God.

In Luke, Jesus goes on to emphasize two aspects of praying … one having to do with us … and the other with the God whom we address. *Regarding God*, Jesus says prayer is like talking to a friend or asking a parent for help. We don't have to beg … God loves us and wants to provide what we need. *Regarding us*, Jesus says we ought to be persistent in praying … asking … seeking … knocking … never giving up.

In all seasons and circumstances, Christians pray. Though the world may laugh at us, Christians pray. Though we fumble with the words … ask for the wrong things … and make the same pleas 'til we're blue in the face with repetition, Christians pray. Though we bring our wounds and faults and flaws and foibles and embarrassing weaknesses before God, Christians pray. Though injustice, violence, and evil abound around us, Christians pray. When we are tempted to embrace the glittering goods that deal death, Christians pray. In times of joy and seasons of sorrow … in moments of danger and days of deliverance … in hours of service and seasons of celebration … Christians pray. Christians pray because the need pours out of us. Christians pray because we have to share our hearts with our best friend. Christians pray because only God can provide what we need. Prayer is not a begging for “stuff” … and it’s certainly not a way of seeking competitive advantage over others (what Niebuhr called "lobbying in the Divine courts for special favors"). Prayer is embracing the God who loves us and already knows what we need … that what we need above all else is God.

Anne Lamott remembers this line from a book she read on prayer: "The Gulf Stream will flow through a (soda) straw provided the straw is aligned to the Gulf Stream, and not at cross purposes with it." Prayer is lining ourselves up with the free flow of God's spirit.

In another way, I suppose you could say that being with God "at cross purposes" is precisely what prayer is about, meaning, of course, the cross of Christ. Abraham Heschel believed prayer was a way of claiming certain spaces and situations for God, like planting the flag of God's dominion in new territory. "To pray," he observed, is "to bring God back into the world... to expand God's presence." Thus, prayer is our first and best tool for extending the peaceful rule of God in the world … beginning with our own hearts … our own actions. But doing so may bring us to a cross as it did Jesus.

"Lord, teach us to pray...." As if life didn't drive us all to our knees and leave us with hardly a shred of sanity. As if what we didn't need most of all is to connect with our Creator and get help. But Jesus answered the request. He gave us a model to repeat until we get it right. He gave us the words and ideas and spirit to assert against the death dealing dangers which surround us. He told us how to pray. He showed us how to pray. He became humankind's best prayer to God … from a garden … from a cross … from a tomb, and afterwards … beside the sea at breakfast with his friends … at a home in Emmaus sharing the supper of remembrance ... and here … when the church gathers … when we share the sacred supper or sing our praises … speak our hurts and our hopes … Jesus prays for us and through us again … connecting us with God.

Therefore beloved, let us pray. Let us take a few moments of silence in this quiet place today to give our full attention to God. I invite you, not to offer up a list of needs or even to name your friend's crisis or our recent world disasters. Those prayers do matter, but in these moments … and again and again as you need to (and you need to!) … be still … be quiet. Hush the noise around you and the distracting voices within you …and just be with God for a while. Because God is what you need. So let us pray, beloved, let us pray! O, let us pray.