

Date: July 25, 2004

SUNDAY: Ordinary 17

SERMON: Living Prayer

Text(s): Luke 11:1-13

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One of the things that people have discovered that the Internet is good for (or bad for, depending on your perspective) is disseminating jokes. I'm sure most of us have friends who send us jokes by email, jokes that they received in an email and thought them funny enough to send them to us. Sometimes they're funny, and sometimes they're annoying because we've already seen the same joke in ten other emails. Someone did send me a delightful collection of prayers prayed by Sunday School children that an astute Sunday School teacher had managed to record for posterity. They're not only very funny, but some are actually quite profound. So I thought I'd share a few of them with you as a way of getting us thinking about prayer.

Here's one from an aspiring geneticist: "Dear God, Did you mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident?"

This one probably stands as good a chance as anything else of bringing peace to Israelis and Palestinians: "Dear God, Maybe Cain and Abel wouldn't kill each other so much if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother."

Fall fashions are making their appearance in the stores, and this one puts our obsession with clothes in perspective: "Dear God, If you watch me in church on Sunday, I'll show you my new shoes."

I suspect God enjoys such prayers as much as we do. Would that all of our prayers were so uncomplicated and truthful.

Prayer appears to be one of those activities that is uniquely human. At least, we see no evidence that any of our fellow creatures pray.

Our tendency to pray is the result of our creation in the image of God. God has put within us this capacity for relationship with our Creator,

a capacity that is expressed in prayer. St. Augustine has perhaps stated this view most beautifully in his *Confessions*: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

This is not to say, however, that all prayers are equally valid or equally efficacious. If that were true, then God must be very confused about which prayers to answer. Many, if not most of our prayers are rather selfish, looking for divine aid in getting us gratification for our desires rather than our real needs. Or we use prayer as a weapon against those we hate; nations at war routinely call on God to help them defeat their enemies, secure in the belief that God is on their side. Our prayers often reveal what kind of God it is to whom we are praying, and many of our prayers reveal that the God to whom we pray is really a cultural or tribal or nationalistic idol of our own making. How we pray, and to whom we pray, and the motives that we have in prayer and what we ask for in our prayers are all more important than the simple fact *that* we pray.

I've entitled this sermon "Living Prayer," with an intentional double meaning. I want us to think about the kind of prayer that is alive, that is vital, that is valid, that actually brings us into that relationship with God for which we hunger. But I also mean it in the sense, not only that our prayer is living, but that we are living our prayer. Living prayer is not only the quality or kind of prayer that we address to God, but a re-ordering of our whole lives so that we live in the world in a different way as a result of our prayer.

This dual aspect of prayer that is alive because it comes to life in the way we live is particularly visible in the prayer that we know as "the Lord's Prayer," or the "Our Father," which we have read in our gospel lesson today. Someone once referred to praying this prayer as a "political act" because if prayed sincerely, it implies certain fundamental ways of living and behaving that have concrete social, and therefore political, consequences.

The version of this prayer in St. Luke's

gospel is slightly different in wording, and somewhat shorter, than the version in St. Matthew's gospel, chapter 6, differences that might be expected of something that was originally handed down orally for many years before being written down. The version that we use each week in our liturgy is a combination of both Luke's and Matthew's versions, but I'll be referring only to St. Luke's version which is what we've read today. One of those differences is that in Luke's version, we pray, "forgive us our sins (or trespasses)" whereas Matthew has us praying "forgive us our debts." First Parish has historically favored Matthew's version, though some of us have come from churches that favored Luke's version, and some of us sometimes get confused and pray the other version, as I did last week while standing in front of the microphone. I doubt seriously whether God cares whether we say "debts" or "trespasses," so we can feel free to pray whichever version we learned by heart.

The various sentences or phrases of the prayer are roughly divided into two parts. The address and petitions in the first part, orient us toward God, and teach us who we are in relationship to God. The petitions of the second part of the prayer orient us toward our neighbors and teach us how to live in relationship to other people. In this way it supports what both the rabbis before Jesus and Jesus himself taught about the whole law being summed up in the command to love God and to love our neighbors. This prayer helps us attain that correct orientation of our lives.

The first part of the prayer, the part that orients us rightly toward God, has three significant phrases. The opening address, "*Father*," is not the warm, familial term with which Jesus frequently addressed God, *Abba*, which means "papa" or "daddy," but the more formal word *pater* that designates the transcendent source of all being, particularly of all human beings. It establishes the creator-creature relationship. Addressing God as *Father*, or

Creator, which would be an acceptable synonym in this context, affirms that this God to whom we pray is not a god of our own making; rather this God stands over against us, and calls us into being, into a relationship of dependence and accountability to God. To address God in this way is the first step to getting the order of things right. It puts God rather than ourselves at the center of the universe.

"*Hallowed be your name*," further establishes this distinction between creator and creature. To hallow something is to set it apart as distinct from that which is ordinary or common. To pray that God's name be hallowed is to recognize that ultimate reality, ultimate worth, ultimate truth belongs to God and not to ourselves or the things God has created. This is what we mean when we speak of worshipping God. The word worship means "to ascribe worth." Ascribing worth to God acknowledges God's distinctiveness from us. Everything that we are and do is derivative. This petition protects us from idolatry, from ascribing ultimate reality or worth to anything created, including ourselves.

"*Your kingdom come*," affirms that God's creation, and therefore our lives, are moving toward a goal which the Creator has intended. History, that is the story of our world and our human place in it is not an endless wheel ever turning round upon itself and endlessly repeating itself. We often say history repeats itself, but in reality it never does. Patterns recur, but events do not. Similarity is not sameness. History is not a wheel, but a road, a spiraling corkscrew road perhaps, but a road nonetheless. We are going somewhere, and that somewhere is the goal that Jesus spoke of as "the kingdom of God." To pray "thy kingdom come" is to orient ourselves to live in light of God's future. It implies that we must live in ways that are compatible with that goal rather than in ways that strive only for self-generated, short-term goals or goals that run contrary to God's intentions.

This is not a truth that is self-evident in

our world. One could never guess from reading the newspaper or watching the news on TV that human history is moving toward a goal that a wise Creator has set for it. Such a truth can only be discerned when a community of people begin to live *as though* it were true. When the world sees the people of God living out the values and mandates of that future kingdom, then its reality begins to become visible. When we pray, “*Your kingdom come,*” we are not praying for the end to arrive, but for the future to become present in and through our lives. Or to put it another way, we are praying that God’s will and not the will of sinful human beings will prevail. To pray that prayer seriously will change the way we live. In fact, as we discover when we begin to really live this part of the prayer, when we really begin to let God’s sovereign rule become present and visible in our behavior, life takes on a whole new flavor, a whole new sense of meaning and possibility.

Perhaps another one of those children’s prayers can sum up for us the proper orientation of our lives toward God: “Dear God, I do not think that anybody could be a better God. Well, I just want you to know that, and I’m not saying that just because you are God already.”

Right relationship to God will have immediate consequences for our relationship to everyone and everything else. And in the second part of the prayer Jesus gave us several petitions that orient us toward our neighbors.

“*Give us each day our daily bread,*” is the petition that helps us remember that we are not self-made. We are radically and fundamentally dependent. To pray this petition truly is a powerful antidote to the idolatry of materialism and consumerism and self-enrichment that is always seeking to enslave us. To humbly ask for God’s provision for our most basic needs is to recognize also our obligation to care for the needs of our neighbor. For it is through others that God answers this prayer. If we had to all produce our own daily bread, some of us would almost certainly starve. Our hardest work, our

best efforts, our most self-reliant striving can never be free from a relationship of interdependence with our neighbors. Therefore, none of us may turn a blind eye to our neighbor’s need or neglect our neighbor who is poor or refuse to share our bread, for our bread is not truly our own. That’s why Jews and Christians have the tradition of saying grace before meals. Not because it’s some magic ritual that somehow makes the food more nourishing, or because God will be angry if we don’t, but because it is a way of recognizing that even though we may have worked hard to earn the money for our daily bread, the labor of many others was also necessary, and the very bread we eat is, in a very real sense, God’s gift.

The next petition is also one that orients us toward our neighbor. “*Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who are indebted to us,*” is perhaps one of the most dangerous of all prayers. Forgiveness is not something that comes naturally. The plain fact is, most of us prefer to hang on to grudges, we cling with self-righteous resentment to the wounds that others have caused. Another of those children’s prayers illustrates well the way we often operate, though as adults we would never be so candid: “Dear God, Did you really mean ‘do unto others as they do unto you?’ Because if you did, I’m going to fix my brother.” The chance to “fix our brothers” (or sisters), to get our revenge in a calculated manner, to be able to say that offhand, but deeply cruel remark, to do that small thing that makes the other writhe with guilt— this is deeply satisfying to our vengeful little souls, isn’t it?

And it’s why our souls are often little and vengeful. And why such little vindictive acts, magnified by repetition and passed on through generations result in monstrous evils wreaked upon the suffering body of humanity. Dag Hammarskjöld, perhaps the greatest of all secretary generals of the United Nations, once said, “The one who refuses to forgive breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass.”

Forgiveness stops the chain of action and reaction in its tracks. Forgiveness restores relationship. Forgiveness liberates both the wronged and the wrongdoer from the endless escalation of crime and punishment. When we understand, as this prayer forces us to understand, that our own forgiveness by God is dependent upon our willingness to forgive others, it provides a powerful new motivation. That's why one can never pray this prayer too often. We need to pray it until it becomes so much a part of us that it lives in us and through us, transforming the relationships in which we are involved. Forgiveness is never easy, nor instantaneous, but neither is it as hard as we make it. And it is essential if we want to live in fully human and humane relationships.

The final petition brings us back full circle to our relationship to God, helping us to understand that when all is said and done, we cannot really separate our relationship to other people from our relationship to God. They are inextricably bound up together. "*Lead us not into temptation,*" or as the more accurate translations put it, "*do not bring us to the time of trial.*" This final petition in the Lord's Prayer is a recognition of our finiteness, our frailty as humans. Our lives are fragile, our power to overcome what the old prayerbook calls "the changes and chances of this fleeting world," is not great. To pray this prayer is to ask, humbly, that we not be brought to a situation that would be so devastating as to cause us to lose all hope in God and fall into despair. It is a recognition that, finally, we are not sufficient in ourselves. We cannot supply all our own needs, we cannot overcome all difficulties in our own strength, we cannot escape the clutches of that which threatens ultimately to undo us—the power of death. In the face of our ultimate helplessness to create eternal life for ourselves, we can either adopt a stoic resignation or we can pray this prayer, trusting humbly in God, that in the final analysis, God alone is the ground under our lives, and

whether we live or whether we die, we belong to God.

So you see, this prayer is not only a living prayer in the sense that *is effective*, but living in the sense that it creates a space in which we can live, rightly oriented toward God and toward our neighbors, and with a right sense of who we truly are. Prayer, as St. Luke reminds us, is the means by which we open ourselves to the gift of God's spirit, and it is that Holy Spirit, the spirit of God, that ultimately distinguishes us from beasts and makes us truly alive. Perhaps Lady Julian of Norwich, that great saint of the 14th century has put it as well as anyone. She says, "*Prayer unites the soul to God. . . For God looks at us in love, and would have us share in his great work. So he moves us to pray for what it is he wants to do... So by prayer does the soul conform to God. . . This is achieved by the grace of the Holy Spirit, both now and until the time, that still longing and loving, we die. On that day, we shall come to our Lord knowing our self clearly, possessing God completely. . . All this may Jesus grant us. Amen.*"¹

1. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*.