

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

What's your favorite version of the Lord's Prayer? Is it the one that uses the traditional language and cadence we use in the ELCA, so very familiar: "Our Father, who art in heaven." Or is it the one with contemporary language: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." Do you prefer this version from Luke that simply starts with "Father, hallowed be your name"? Then there's discussion over some fine points: Are we forgiven "sins" or "trespasses"? And how does the prayer end? "Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil"? Or "Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil"? There are different versions of this prayer used by Lutherans and Catholics and I'm not sure what other protestant denominations use. But of course, the important thing is that we pray.

Just what is it we are praying in this prayer and what are we praying for? We know that prayer was important to Jesus, the gospel of Luke makes constant reference to Jesus going to a place a solitude to pray. So prayer should also be important to us.

What we read today begins with "He was praying in a certain place, And after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'" His disciples knew from the Psalms and Isaiah that God, who had covenanted with Israel, was ready to hear prayer and answer, even before a word was uttered. Nevertheless, they come to Jesus with the question of technique on their lips. We pick up a couple of things in this. First, prayer is something one learns, something that can be taught. I personally prefer what we call the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer, starting with "Our Father who art in heaven..." in big part because that's the version my mom taught me when I was very little, hardly standing above her knee as she sat on my bed.

You also notice perhaps that there are forms of prayer that teachers pass on. It was customary in Jesus' time, and it still is today, for teachers to instruct their students how to pray and give them examples, I do this with our confirmation students. John had taught his disciples how to pray, and the disciples of Jesus asked for the same, to be taught. So Jesus told them, "When you pray, say."

Note here that what Jesus gives is a way to pray, a way to formulate prayer, and what to pray for. Now another point about this prayer is that it is a community prayer. It's a prayer that praises God, and then follows petitions for those praying. The language of "us," "we," assumes that those praying long for final coming of the kingdom. Jesus moves his disciples away from focus on the self to focus on God and the work God is doing. Let your name be holy always and everywhere. Let your kingdom prevail always and everywhere! Be what you are, the provider of life and grant what is needed for today. In your mercy, let us be merciful! Keep us from falling when our faith is tested!

The “daily bread” is sustenance for the day, food for those who to take up the cross daily, and who were expected to travel on missionary journeys with what is needed for the day.

In Luke, we ask for God’s forgiveness of sins while promising to forgive others their debts. The Lord’s Prayer is not only what Jesus gave to his disciples, but it was picked up by the early church and was part of their understanding of how God shall be praised and what to ask for. It’s particularly important that it has been handed down through generations to bind us together in community.

How are we to pray? We’re to pray boldly, expectantly, praising God, placing our needs before God. We trust in God’s goodness, God’s justice, God’s mercy. This is the prayer of community. Nowadays we hear about Jesus as “personal savior,” and you have probably been asked the question “Have you been saved?” But that would have been a foreign notion to the Jewish community of Jesus’ time, and out of character with his teachings. It’s about community, not you and me individually. So pray boldly, brothers and sisters, pray boldly. Jesus gives this prayer, content focused away from self, showing a vision where the one who prays loves God and what God loves.

It is a counter to the great spiritual disease of our time that we love ourselves, and we love God only to the degree that God loves what we love. In short, for all of our talk about love in our world, the sad truth is that we do not know how to love rightly. Such a truth makes Jesus’ last comment all the more poignant and urgent, as Jesus’ teaching on prayer ends with the promise that God gives the one gift necessary, that is, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth which guides into all truth. And the truth is we can pray and be persistent because God is always ready to listen to us and to hear us. AMEN