



"Primary Speech"

Luke 11:1-13

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

July 29, 2007

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

It was my first year of seminary in Chicago. Gloria was working at the local hospital and one of her patients was a man who survived a terrible automobile accident that took the life of his wife. They'd been on vacation in Illinois when the accident occurred

During Gloria's care of him, she discovered he was Lutheran. He asked her if she knew a pastor who might sit with him during the hour of his wife's funeral back home in Missouri. Gloria told him I was a seminary student, and I would come and sit with him. I really wished she hadn't volunteered me – I hadn't finished ministry 101 yet; but I knew I should do it, and I did.

With fear and trembling, I went to his hospital room that day. I knew I was an awkward beginner. I've seldom felt so useless or powerless. Neither of us said much. There's not much to say at a moment like that. Mostly, we talked about his late wife. I sat by his bedside and did what I could.

When the time came for me to leave, I offered to pray with him. I stumbled for words but did my best. A few seconds into my prayer, he interrupted and began to pray those familiar and powerful words, "Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...." I quickly joined him and we prayed the Lord's Prayer together, a much better idea than mine.

Prayer lies deep in the human spirit. Like music, prayer, or the desire for prayer, goes deep and shapes the way we experience the world. Most people pray. Even people who aren't religious pray.

This week I was reading the story of a man who hadn't practiced his childhood religion for decades. Suddenly his life was in danger and to his own surprise, he heard himself praying the most basic prayer of them all, "Oh God, help me."

There's plenty of help for prayer too. I Googled "prayer" and found 74 million sites. The word "prayers" gave me 29 million sites. "Prayers for Children" has 2 million sites. Hundreds of books and thousands of articles address prayer. All that in addition to innumerable sermons on prayer. One of the consequences is huge and unmet expectations for most Christians.

The reality is quite different from the ideal expectations. While prayer is the primary speech of the human soul, and while books, articles, and sermons urge more prayer, deeper spirituality from prayer, or some ideal world of prayer, the reality is quite different.

That old favorite hymn "I Come to the Garden" says:

I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses,
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.

And he walks with me and he talks with me....

Rev. Jana Childers writes:

I don't know about you, but much as I love the poets and especially the gospel songwriters – I have to say it – my prayer life is not much like a dewy walk through a rose garden. On your average day, Jesus does not come to the garden alone to meet me....My prayer life is not much like a dewy garden path.

I understand. I suspect you understand, too. So I come to Jesus' teaching on prayer with high hopes.

Jesus' disciples observed him praying. They probably didn't walk with God in dewy rose gardens either. They wanted Jesus to help them pray. The rabbis taught their disciples how to pray. They developed a long set of prayers still offered by pious Jews daily. John the Baptist taught prayers to his disciples, too.

"Teach us to pray," the disciples asked Jesus. His response is probably not what they or we expect. He didn't offer elaborate instructions for prayer nor did he give them a prayer book for daily use.

What he did do is give them a very short prayer, The Lord's Prayer. It takes less than a minute to pray, and the version in Luke's gospel is a very short version of that prayer. Christians have been praying the longer version of the Lord's Prayer found in Matthew ever since.

The Lord's Prayer in Luke is remarkably simple. A simple address, "Father," is followed by five petitions:

- Hallowed be your name.
- Your kingdom come.
- Give us this day our daily bread.
- Forgive us our sins for we forgive everyone who sins against us.
- Lead us not into temptation [or the hour of trial].

That's it! It's simple, basic and to the point. It's just 35 words in English. Apparently Jesus thought this little prayer covers the essentials of life and faith. In fact, Jesus' prayer is quite different from the prayers most of us offer whether we're in trouble or not. Jesus doesn't give us a book of prayers, nor an exhortation to pray more, harder and longer.

I suspect Jesus' disciples expected something a bit more detailed. Surely there's more to prayer than this! And there is more: the Book of Common Prayer, other helpful prayer books and manuals and, of course, those 74 million websites.

Nevertheless, ever since, the church and faithful Christians everywhere have prayed The Lord's Prayer with regularity for 2,000 years. We use the longer version of The Lord's Prayer found in Matthew's Gospel. It's still a very short prayer put in the plural and appropriate for community use: "Our Father...give us...." That simple prayer has shaped the soul of the church and the lives of Christians ever since.

And it seems that we need to pray the Lord's Prayer more these days. The world and the church need its shaping power. Cynics would put it another way. After all these years, The Lord's Prayer doesn't seem to be working.

Think about it: God name is certainly not revered or hallowed much in the public square. In fact, God's name and reputation are taking a large hit these days. God's kingdom doesn't seem to be faring well either. Jesus promised a kingdom of peace, justice, and equality for all, a world where God is loved above all, and where everyone serves his or her neighbor sacrificially. We pray for daily bread in a world in which children starve, some of whom pray this prayer. We don't seem to be doing well on the forgiveness front either. The prayer says we forgive those who sin against us. The world and the church are full of grudges, lawsuits, revenge, and other forms of anger and hate. And who of us is not going or has not gone through grievous trials as we've prayed "lead us not into the hour of trial"? Nevertheless, we keep on praying. Our instincts seem better than reality.

As usual, Jesus had something deeper and far more profound to teach than the outward forms and mechanics of prayer – or other ways most of us understand prayer.

He quickly told his disciples two short stories meant to move us to a radical and powerful vision of prayer.

"Which of you," he began. For us, all these centuries later, we need to hear Jesus say, "Imagine a world like this." Imagine a world in which hospitality is one of the central social values. Imagine a world in which doors are always open, the pantry always available, a world in which we'd prefer to go hungry than fail to feed a visitor. Imagine a community in which failure to offer hospitality to all was a matter of deep shame and humiliation.

Further, imagine a house of one room. Living, cooking, dining and sleeping all take place in that small place. At night everyone sleeps on the floor on a mat. At daybreak, mother and father rise to prepare for the day. The man of the house ordinarily hauled in wood and built a fire under the oven. The woman would be mixing dough for bread. The loaves of bread cooked in the morning were the meals for the day. The next day they repeated the routine.

A family lived in such a world. It was late at night, and they were all fast asleep. There's a loud knock on the door. The knocking continues. The man of the house cries out, "Go away. We're all asleep in here. Don't wake up the kids."

It's a friend of his outside pounding on the door. He yells back through the door, "A friend of mine just arrived in town. I'm out of bread. Do you have some I can have, so I can feed my friend?"

Of course the man inside the house does not want to get up, start the fire, wake his wife to make bread and likely, wake the children in the process.

But, Jesus went on, because of the shameless persistence of the man at the door – or perhaps the translation should be "the shame involved if he doesn't rise and make bread," – he will get up, disrupt his family, and serve his friend so hospitality can be offered to the visitor.

Therefore, Jesus said, "ask, seek, and knock." God will answer the door.

But the power of the teaching comes in the next part. "Which of you parents – (imagine this) – if your child asks for a fish will give them a snake? Or, if your child asks for an egg, will you give a stone?"

Here comes the point: "If you human parents, who are imperfect sinners, know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to all who ask.

The point Jesus is making is not so much about prayer as about God. Who we are talking to when we pray is the issue. Remember how the Lord's Prayer begins, "Father," or "Our

Father.” Jesus passes right by the formalities of prayer. He doesn’t address God as “Great God,” “Master of the Universe,” or the unspeakable name of God, “Yahweh.” He really doesn’t use the word “father.”

Instead Jesus addresses God in the familiar language of the family circle. “Call God, ‘*abba*’, he teaches. “*Abba*” means something like, “dad, daddy or papa.” He could just as easily have said, “*imma*,” “mom,” “mama” or “mommy.” Jesus teaches that prayer is the language of child to parent. Prayer speaks to the unique, special relationship only found in a family.

Prayer is not about mechanics, discipline, prayer books or church liturgies – though all those are necessary and helpful. Prayer is about talking to a daddy/mommy God who made us and who loves us more than we can ever imagine.

I don’t know how many new parents I’ve heard say, “I didn’t think I could love another person so much until I had this baby.” More than once when a child is in peril or terribly ill, they’ve said to me, “I would trade places with him/her in a heartbeat.”

That’s how much God loves us – and more. If we fallible human parents know how to treat our children well, how much more will our heavenly parent take care of us, each a dearly beloved child.

You may remember the terrible shooting at the nation’s capital in 1998. A crazy person going into the capital pulled a gun and started shooting people. Our son was working for a Minnesota congressman at the time. I was driving through Wisconsin listening to the radio when I heard the news. It was a news flash and the report was that there were an unknown number of fatalities.

My heart sank. While the odds were good, nevertheless he was there and in danger. Quickly I turned to the Clear Channel Minneapolis radio station to get the local story. A Minnesota Senator came on the air and announced that the entire Minnesota delegation and staff members were safe. I breathed a sigh of relief, and my heart returned to normal. I still wondered the effect it might have on our son.

He’d called home right after the incident to tell us he was all right. Gloria saved the message until I returned home. We called back and couldn’t get through. Finally, that night he called. He talked to Gloria first. When I got on the line, he said, “Pops” (that’s what he always calls me), “Pops, I’m okay. But, he added, “I was supposed to be in a meeting fifty feet from where the shooting took place. I skipped the meeting.” Then he went on, with voice breaking, saying that he knew some of the Capital police officers who were killed. My heart broke with his.

Jana Childers writes about the death of a dear friend from cancer. Her friend gathered a group of her friends to walk through the valley of darkness with her. They prayed with her and for her. When it became clear the disease would be fatal, the prayers deepened. And, wonder of wonders, Jana adds, during her last months, her friend seemed luminous with God’s presence. She said that the prayers and the power of old familiar hymns were sustaining her.

When she died, the friends gathered around her body and sang the old spiritual, “I’ll fly away.” Their hearts were broken, but they were not in despair.

What did her dying friend receive from those prayers, all that asking, seeking, and knocking? She received the best gift of all, Childers answers. She received God.

If you human parents know how to give good gifts to your children, Jesus said, how much more will your heavenly parent give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!

She received God, and not just any God. Her daddy/mommy God answered the door.

Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims
Sermon 7/29/07

Our heavenly mommy/daddy God comes to us whenever we ask. And our God comes and feeds us when we gather in his name. This is the table of the Lord – and God is here.

When we were in Boston, I often went to Trinity Church in Copley Square on Wednesdays for noon Eucharist. It was a refreshing respite in a very busy life.

I'll never forget the first time the celebrant was a woman. When I went to the front and knelt with my hands cupped to receive the bread, I heard her wonderful, feminine voice say, "This is the bread of heaven."

My heart stirred. A woman was feeding me in the name of my mommy/daddy God! All my life women have fed me: my mom, Gloria, my daughter and daughters-in-law – and many more. And now the bread of heaven by the hand of a woman.

God comes to answer the door. God comes to feed us. And more often than not, it seems, God comes to us through the hand, voice, and love of another. "Our daddy/mommy in heaven...."

Amen.

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