

Proper 12 (C)

Lk 11.1-13

There's something about the Lord's Prayer that really bothers me: it's too perfect. Every time I hear the story of Jesus teaching his disciples to pray, it conjures up an image of a bunch of people sitting around in some green field with the sun shining and the flowers blooming and the birds singing, and the disciples say, "Lord, teach us to pray." Then Jesus gets kind of misty-eyed and says in a soft voice, "When you pray, pray like this." Then the disciples "oh" and "ah" a little bit, and then they all join hands and sing a few rounds of "Kumbayah."

I don't know about you, but my prayer life doesn't look like that. I will admit, there have been times when I've been in sunny, green fields with the flowers and the birds and all that and I have felt moved to pray. But most of the time my experience of prayer is quite different. Prayer is hard work. Not only is the experience of prayer oftentimes a struggle, sometimes simply making time for prayer can be a challenge.

I don't think I'm alone in feeling this way. Every so often, someone will conduct a survey and will ask people about their experience of prayer. The results of such surveys are almost always the same: virtually everyone says they pray a lot, but almost no one is able to describe how their prayers influence the rest of their lives. Most people will say prayer is something they *should* do, and most people will even say prayer is something they *are* doing. But most people will also admit they're not sure if their prayers have any effect; when pressed, most people will admit they sometimes wonder if God even hears their prayers.

One reason we struggle so much with prayer is because we're very often confused about what prayer is. We think prayer is something different from what it really is. When we do that, we end up doing something other than praying even when we think we're praying. So maybe a good way for us to get a handle on prayer is to start by clarifying what prayer is not.

Let's get the obvious out of the way: prayer is not magic. Prayer is not some kind of supernatural technology designed to bring about some natural event.

Prayer is not ritual. Simply reciting particular words in a particular way at a particular time of day or in a particular place does not qualify as prayer.

Prayer is not negotiation. If we think we can bargain with God or make a deal with God or work out a mutually beneficial arrangement with God, we are not praying.

Prayer is not meditation. Deepening our awareness or raising our consciousness or practicing mindfulness are all well and good, but none of those things are the same as prayer.

Prayer is not what we might call mystical experience or religious ecstasy. We may have a profound awareness of the presence and activity of God, but we may not. Whether or not we do has very little to do with whether or not we are really praying.

So it's not magic, it's not ritual, it's not negotiation, it's not meditation, and it's not mystical experience. And that puts us in a bit of a bind, because we devote a lot of our time and energy to these practices. We constantly use technologies of all kinds to get things done. We're always observing little rituals, some spoken and many more unspoken, designed to get us through the day. We negotiate with one another all the time: we negotiate for resources, we negotiate for attention, we even negotiate for affection. And our entertainment and media industries have taught us to expect regular infusions of ecstasy and rapture. So it's not surprising that we should think of prayer in one or another of these ways. But it's not; it's none of them.

So what is it? If it's not this and it's not that, what exactly *are* we doing when we pray? Here's where we need to take another look at the prayer Jesus teaches to his disciples.

This prayer has been with us for so long and we are so familiar with it that we need to be very careful about how we understand it. If we look closely at each of the elements of the Lord's Prayer, we find something rather surprising: every one of the various parts of this prayer is about some kind of hardship or some kind of conflict.

In other words, when we look closely at this prayer we see that it is *not* the kind of prayer you would be inclined to offer on a warm summer day in a pleasant green field with the flowers and the birds and all that. This is a prayer that is custom made for times of struggle. This is a prayer that takes it for granted that praying can be a very hard thing to do. If you're trying to make something happen, the working assumption is that it's not already happening.

"Hallowed be your name." Offering that as a prayer only really makes sense when you find yourself in a situation where God's name is *not* hallowed or *not* honored.

"Your kingdom come." That's a prayer to be offered when you find yourself living somewhere *other* than in the kingdom of God, someplace where the sovereignty of God may not be evident.

"Give us each day our daily bread." That only makes sense as a prayer if you're not sure you're going to get *any* bread today. If you're not worried about where your next meal is coming from, you're probably won't feel the need to ask for it.

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive everyone indebted to us." This only makes sense as a prayer if we recognize that we've done things that need forgiving, and that we oftentimes find it hard to forgive others. You'd better be careful with this one: this is not something you want to pray unless you are ready to offer mercy to those you think don't deserve your mercy. This is something you pray only if you're willing to love those you'd rather not love. If you talk the talk but don't walk the walk on this one, you're playing with fire.

"Do not bring us to the time of trial." This is the prayer of someone who has every reason to believe that the time of trial is exactly what they're facing.

I wonder what the disciples of Jesus thought of this prayer. The gospels don't tell us, but my guess is they didn't "oh" and "ah" and then join hands for a round of "Kumbayah." I think they would have been surprised by two things: they would have been surprised by the intimacy of the

prayer, and they would have been surprised by the honesty of the prayer. Jesus taught them to keep their prayers and thus to keep their faith focused on the mundane realities of their daily lives.

This prayer would probably have given them a more intimate way of addressing God than anything they had known before. They were being invited to address God in the same way Jesus himself addressed God, and that would likely have surprised them because of the closeness of the relationship they knew Jesus had with God.

And he taught them, too, that the blessings of God are received in community. “Give *us* our daily bread, forgive *us* our sins, save *us* from trial.” There’s not a lot of “me” in the Lord’s Prayer, but there’s an awful lot of “us.” The prayer Jesus taught his disciples was designed not only to help them connect with God, but to help them connect with one another as well.

There’s not a lot of room to hide in the Lord’s Prayer; it’s a very honest prayer. “God, we need bread. God, we need forgiveness. God, we need help.” This is not a prayer for overachieving, self-sufficient, got-it-all-together type people: this is a prayer for people who are radically dependent. At the same time, it’s perfect for people who need to be reminded they are radically dependent. Those who don’t have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, those who feel they’re pretty good people and don’t need much in the way of mercy or forgiveness, those who don’t think too much about the sovereignty of God, they are going to be brought up short by this prayer.

Rowan Williams once wrote about the intimate connection between prayer and silence: real prayer begins in silence and it ends in silence. It begins in the silence that arises when we recognize ourselves to be in the presence of the living God, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. It ends in the silence that arises when we recognize that our every effort, our every word ultimately falls short of all that needs to be said. But the remarkable thing about this, says Williams, is that when we enter this kind of silence we find ourselves really praying, much more effectively and much more honestly than we often do when we cover our prayers with words.

All of this brings us closer than ever to recognizing what prayer really is. It’s not magic, it’s not ritual, it’s not negotiation, and it’s not meditation or mystical experience: prayer is the practice of learning to live in utter dependence on God. Even the word itself suggests this: the root of the word “prayer” is the same as the root of the word “precarious.” Both words come from the same Latin term—*precarius*—and that word was used to refer to something that could be obtained only by entreaty.

In other words, learning to pray involves learning to live precariously, learning to live in a way that is not entirely secure, not entirely predictable, even a little dangerous. When we say, “Lord, teach us to pray,” what we’re saying is, “Lord, teach us to live with uncertainty, teach us to live with insecurity, teach us to live with the instability of our lives.” The more we pray, the more uncertain, the more insecure, the more precarious we may find our lives becoming.

But—here’s the good news—when we learn to live this way we find that our insecurity and our

uncertainty makes room for God. The first-century Jewish rabbi Gamaliel said to his disciples, “Learn to do God’s will as if it were your own, and you will find that God will do your will as if it were *his* own.”

That sounds a lot like what another first-century Jewish rabbi promised his disciples: “Ask, and it will be given. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened. . . . Even bad people know how to give good gifts to those they love, so how much more will the Father give to those who simply ask?”

The Reformed theologian Karl Barth once suggested that learning to pray involves learning to come before God with empty hands. Not only does learning to pray mean learning to let go of all the *bad* things we think come between us and God, it also means learning to let go of all the *good* things we think we have to offer to God. Learning to pray means learning to come before God in utter dependence, trusting that it is only God who can teach us what to do about both the good things and the bad things of our lives.

But learning to pray also means learning to receive all that God has to give us when we come before him with empty hands. We use our hands a lot during worship. We hold out our hands, and we find God joins our hands together with one another and makes us his people. We hold out our hands, and we find them filled with the presence of the living Christ. We hold out our hands, and we find God takes our hands in his and draws us forward into his own life.

We say, “Lord, teach us to pray,” and we find our lives filled with blessing beyond measure. And then, like King David, we are moved to pray, “Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, for ever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and on earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head over all.” Amen.

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