

“It’s me, it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.” I suspect that most often when we sing or say or think those words, it’s because we’re hoping someone will pray for us. We might be thinking that we’re in trouble and that only other folks praying hard for us will get us out of whatever jam we’re in. I wonder, though, if a more theologically sound subtext for that hymn might be “O Lord, *I* need to pray.” That seems to be what’s in the disciples’ minds at the opening of our Gospel passage this morning. They’ve seen Jesus praying, seen how important it is to him and how it refreshes him, they know John the Baptizer taught specific prayers to his disciples. Now they want their Master’s magic formula for getting on God’s good side and chasing those blues away.

It’s clear that they’d had plenty of opportunity to observe Jesus in prayer. Luke’s Gospel points this out even more than the other three. Not only does Luke mention Jesus in prayer the most but both the first and the last acts of Jesus’ public ministry in Luke are prayers. Luke begins his relating of Jesus’ ministry with these words: “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened...” Likewise, Luke records the final words of Jesus on the cross as a prayer: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” So if the disciples then and we now think that prayer was important to Jesus and that there just might be something in it for us, we’d be right. But it might not be what we suspect.

Anglican priest and professor, L. Gregory Bloomquist of St. Paul University in Ontario, says that Jesus taught his disciples two basic things about prayer that day – what their priorities should be in prayer and the importance of persistence in prayer. Although I’m going to look at rather different specifics than Rev. Bloomquist, I do like his general categories, so I’m going to borrow those for this morning. Let’s think first about the priorities that Jesus taught his disciples they should pursue in prayer.

First there is the address of the prayer: Father. I suspect all of us have heard before just how radical Jesus’ use of this term for Almighty God must have seemed to his hearers. While it’s true that there are a good number of passages in the Old Testament which point to God as the loving Father of humankind, it’s also true that the standard form of address to God in Jewish prayers was much more lofty than Jesus’ intimate “Abba” or “Daddy.” By telling his disciples to begin their prayers with this tender word, Jesus is teaching them about the kind of relationship they are to have with God, a relationship of complete love and trust, just as a tiny child loves and trusts the parent. This relationship with God was a priority for Jesus. Again, Luke demonstrates this in the literary craft of the Gospel. The first words and the last words of Jesus in this Gospel are about the Father, from “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” to “I am sending upon you what my Father promised.” To pray as Jesus would have us pray, we must put a loving relationship with our Loving God first and foremost.

Even as we begin our prayer from a place of intimacy with God, Jesus taught we are also to acknowledge the awesomeness of God. “Hallowed be your name.” Our first request of God is that God’s name, God’s very essence in the understanding of that culture, should be recognized by us and by all the world as hallowed, holy, respected, venerated. I think we can tell from the relationship that Jesus had with the Father that the respect for or hallowing of God is not a negative thing that separates us from God but a positive that allows us to appreciate our Creator all the more. I like what William Loader, the Australian theologian, has to say in this regard:

“Acknowledging the holiness, the dignity, the otherness of the other, must not be reduced to a metaphor of cringing before one who is more powerful, even if that is dressed up respectably as obeisance before the almighty. For then it reinforces the assumption that might is right and the bigger and stronger is the better.” Loader points out that, “There is an awe in relationships which flows from profound respect and love... when we are standing on our feet face-to-face or bowed, not the one before the other, but together in service and mutual care.” Jesus calls us to recognize that Abba, the loving Father who would stoop down to help the beloved little one, is one and the same as the Almighty Creator of the Universe.

And a very recent work of popular literature gives me another way to understand Jesus’ prayer for God’s name to be hallowed. In Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, one plot point features Harry’s quest for three magical objects, the “deathly hallows” of the title. Harry seeks avidly for these talismans, as have generations of wizards before him. Indeed, some have made it their lives’ work. If we would pursue our relationship with God with that sort of dedication and zeal, then truly we would hallow God’s name.

What is it we are really asking for when we say to God, “Your kingdom come”? What does it mean to make that a priority in our lives? One simple answer is that we are asking God to take charge, to be the ruler of our lives. Of course, as I’ve said here many times before, I believe that Jesus’ usage of the metaphor of the Kingdom for the work of God in the lives of humankind is as loaded with grace and love as his metaphor of Abba for the nature of God. To speak of the Kingdom of God is to speak of the peaceable kingdom, what Isaiah wrote of when he envisioned “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox... They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.” The kingdom of God, the peaceable kingdom, is what Micah spoke of when he said, “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.” The kingdom of God is the Beloved Community, the wedding feast, the homecoming. When we say, “Your kingdom come,” to Abba God, we are committing ourselves to doing what we can in our lives to bring that spirit of peace and joy and fellowship to our own community. To say this prayer is to make God’s vision for the world a priority in our own lives.

I mentioned my indebtedness to Gregory Bloomquist for his general categories of priorities and persistence and I’m also impressed with how he expresses verses 3 & 4 as prayers that free us from worries about the present, the past and the future, although, again, I’m going to expand on and deviate from what Bloomquist wrote. “Give us each day our daily bread,” is a very clear prayer for God to grant us what we need right now, in the present. We’re not to get hung up on our desires for materialistic things but simply to ask God for what we truly need each day. This is not the same for asking for everything we want. The so-called “Gospel of Prosperity” that is being preached around the world these days is a dangerous perversion of the idea that God will supply our daily needs. The prayer of Jesus is not the Prayer of Jabez, nor is it the Secret to wealth and power. We are to ask God to supply our daily bread, that which is necessary for our lives, both physical and spiritual. And let’s not forget that the prayer is for God to supply “our” daily bread, not “my daily bread.” When we pray as Jesus taught us, we are praying for the needs of the whole community. There are no stories of Jesus eating alone. The fellowship of the

table is important in the Gospel. Sharing the precious resources of life is a mark of the love which comes from relationship with Abba God. And let us also remember that Jesus himself is the Bread of Life. To pray for our daily bread is also to pray for our community to have contact with the Spirit of Christ on a daily basis. Once again, the priority is the holy relationship, both with God and with each other.

To pray, “forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us,” is to be released from anxiety over the past. I mentioned last week that I try to say as much as possible in my preaching that God loves us, that I think that is the message most needed in our world. A close corollary is that God forgives us. We need not carry the guilt and stress of bad decisions, mistakes, or outright rebellion. I John is a letter to the churches that is all about God’s love for us and one of the best known verses in that letter is chapter one, verse nine: “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins.” Jesus brought the Good News of release to the captives – forgiveness for those who are held captive by their past. Jesus also reminded his disciples again and again through teaching and stories that forgiveness was a grace that must be passed on. I like what that fine Baptist scholar Alan Culpepper says in his commentary on this passage: “One who will not forgive cannot receive forgiveness; mercy flows through the same channel, whether being given or received.” Forgiveness, both received and extended, must be a priority in our prayer and in our lives.

Jesus’ prayer also teaches us how to be released from our anxiety about the future. To pray, “do not bring us to the time of trial,” is to confess that we often look to the future with some dread. To admit to a fear, to look it in the face and call it by name, is to begin to take power over it. To then offer it up to God is a path to further release. There are things in our lives that we are afraid of, each and every one of us. By asking God to take from us a future of trial, we acknowledge that we are, for all of our vaunted independence, truly dependent on God for all of our lives. Richard Foster writes about the iced tea TV commercial that aired a few years ago that pictured people falling backward into a swimming pool. He says prayer is like that. To pray is to allow oneself to fall dependently into the loving embrace of God. Once again, the priority is put on relationship with our Loving God, who is both Mother and Father in caring for us.

With this simple prayer, Jesus taught his disciples what their priorities in prayer should be. He then moves to a story and teaching about the importance of persistence in prayer. Now what can that mean? Is Jesus telling us to simply batter the gates of heaven with our petitions, no matter what they may be, until God gives in? Even the grammar of Luke’s Greek in verse nine might lead us to this conclusion. In the Greek, the words “ask,” “search,” and “knock” are in a tense that implies ongoing action – “keep on asking,” “keep on searching,” “keep on knocking.” It’s easy for me to understand the importance of persistence in petition. When I was a young theatre administrator at Actors Theatre of Louisville, my boss prepared me for a meeting with the head of the theatre, Producing Artistic Director Jon Jory. “Listen,” she said, “Jon’s going to ask you to pursue a bunch of different ideas. Write them down but don’t do anything about them. If he mentions any of them again next time, then go to work. That’s how you know what’s really important to him.” But I don’t think what Jesus is teaching is as simple as getting the boss to repeat himself or as saying “Daddy, daddy, daddy, I want..., I want..., I want...” Jesus did not teach persistence for its own sake. The Rev. Dr. Sam Matthews, a Methodist pastor in Marietta, GA, has this to say: “To be quite frank, persistence in and of itself is no real virtue at all. Jesus

affirmed neither the persistence of the rich man who made a fortune and sought to build bigger barns, nor the persistent interference of the Pharisees. No, instead he affirmed persistence in a good cause: The persistence of the friends who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus; the persistence of the women who traveled with him; and the faithful, persistent prayer of the father of the demon-possessed boy.” It’s worth noting, I think, that in Jesus’ story, the man seeking bread from his friend is not seeking it on his own behalf but because he needs to feed a late-traveling guest. “Give us each day *our* daily bread. Forgive us *our* sins, for we forgive everyone indebted to us. Do not bring *us* to the time of trial.” Our persistent petitions to the Father should not just be on our own behalf, but on behalf of our families, our neighbors, our community.

“Keep on asking, and it will be given you; keep on searching, and you will find; keep on knocking, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” Jesus assures his disciples, then and now, that persistence in prayer has results. Please notice that he does not promise it will have exactly the results we expect. Jesus, after all, knew better. He knew the examples from the Psalms of prayers that go seemingly unanswered or to which answers are long delayed. “I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping... My tears have been my food day and night...” Not even Jesus’ own prayers were always fulfilled in exactly the way we might choose. Consider his long night of prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, when he prayed for the cup of suffering to pass from him, prayed so long and so hard that Luke tells us in his anguish, “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.” If we expect our most persistent prayers to be answered in exactly the way we expect, then we forget Jesus’ words from the cross, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” If we expect our most persistent prayers to be answered in exactly the way we expect, then we forget the example of the Apostle Paul: “to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”” We will not always get exactly what we think we should. God will not give us a snake instead of a fish or a scorpion instead of an egg, for God is our loving parent, who loves us more and better than even the best earthly parent. Jesus tells us the ultimate result of our persistence in prayer: “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Here is where we get to the key to the importance of persistent prayer. When we continually seek a relationship with Abba God in prayer, the result is that the Holy Spirit becomes more and more manifest in our lives. In turn, the Spirit’s influence begins to affect our prayers. Remember Paul’s words to the Romans: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” One of the highlights of my theatrical career is a production I directed for the A.D. Players in Houston in the mid 1990s, “Shadowlands” by William Nicholson. The play, which was first a British TV movie and later a Hollywood feature, tells the story of the famed Christian author C.S. Lewis and his late life, tragically short marriage to American Joy Davidman, who died of cancer. In the play, as Joy rallies during her illness, a friend says to Lewis, “God hears your prayer, doesn’t he? We hear Joy’s getting better.” Lewis responds, “That’s not why I pray,

## Lord, Teach Us to Pray

Harry. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God; it changes ME.” Another Methodist pastor from the South, Rev. Charles Reeb of Casselberry, Florida, makes the explicit connection between the lesson of Nicholson's play and the Gospel: “When we ask long enough, seek hard enough, knock loud enough, and pray persistently enough, something happens on the inside of us. The discipline of prayer begins to awaken us to the Holy Spirit inside of us, and our motives and desires begin to change. It is like the persistence of our praying becomes the axe that breaks up the frozen numbness of our souls. Then the power and wisdom of God break in and we begin to be formed by the will of God.” Once again, Jesus' model of prayer points us towards a vital, living, freeing relationship with relationship with God. If we consistently seek the face of God, if we hunger and thirst for God's presence in our lives, we will discover that no burden is too heavy, that no night is too dark, that God's love enables us to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. It is why Christians for centuries have taken refuge in this prayer by the medieval saint, Thomas à Kempis: “Grant me, O most loving Lord, to rest in thee above all creatures, ... above all riches and art, above all fame and praise, above all sweetness and comfort, above all hope and promise, above all favors and gifts that thou canst give and impart to us, ... above all things visible and invisible, and above all that thou art not, O my God. It is too small and unsatisfying, whatsoever thou bestowest, whilst thou art not seen and not fully obtained. For surely my heart cannot truly rest, nor be entirely contented, unless it rest in thee.”

“Lord, teach us to pray,” the disciples said and surely we echo their request. Teach us to pray so that our prayers might always be focused on our communities and our neighbors and not on ourselves alone. Teach us to pray so that the growing presence of the Holy Spirit might break the stony hardness of our hearts and that the wisdom of the Spirit might make our prayers deeper and truer than we can even conceive. Teach us to pray without ceasing, so that our thoughts might be infused with our love of God and God's love for us, so that our every action might become an offering to God even of the little things of daily life. Lord Jesus, teach us to pray, so that we might see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly. Lord, teach us to pray, so that we might truly be your Body in this place, ready to give ourselves for our neighbors, so that all who see us might say, “See how they love each other. See how they hallow God's name.” Lord, teach us to pray. Amen.