

July 29, 2007

1 Chronicles 29:11-13; Luke 11:1-13

First Parish UCC, Brunswick

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Let Us Pray

If I said that I was going to ask you to lead us in prayer this morning, how would you feel? I suspect some people would be comfortable doing so. Some would be uneasy but intrigued by the idea. Others wouldn't be able to get out the door fast enough. Yet part of why we come each week to worship is to pray -together. So, if you are ever put on the spot to pray, just follow Jesus' advice. Pray the Lord's Prayer. It's safe. Or is it?

When I attend other congregation's worship services, I'm never quite sure what will be included in the order of service. Will they sing hymns I know? (I know, sometimes you wonder about that right here.) Will they have communion that day? The one thing I can pretty much count on is that the Lord's Prayer will be part of the service. I cannot think of another element of worship that so unites Christians around the world. People have told me that when they have visited churches in other parts of the world one of the things they have recognized, even though it was in a different language, was the Lord's Prayer.

Most of us are so used to the English words we use for the Lord's Prayer, I suspect that subconsciously we think these were the actual words that Jesus used. In the temple, Jesus would have been used to saying prayers in Hebrew. However, in this case, he apparently said the whole prayer originally in Aramaic. It was then translated to koine Greek for the New Testament; although the word we translate "Father" was kept in the Aramaic 'Abba.' Then the western church translated the prayer into Latin, and then English.

Some of the words we use are still 'old English.' They have been around so long, we forget that they can be a bit confusing,

especially to young children. Consider the word "hallowed." How often do you use that word at the dinner table? Imagine how children hear the word "hallowed." One little girl came home from church school so excited, telling her parents she had learned God's name. "It's Harold," she announced. "Harold is his name."

Later in the prayer, we come to the place where a denominationally mixed group of English speakers wonder – are we going to say debts, trespasses, or sins? Again, these words can be confusing to children. One child, who grew up in the trespass tradition, didn't really know what that word was. He was heard saying in his prayers one night, "Forgive us our trashcans." Well, he was on the right track. He knew it was something dirty.

Most of us are used to saying debts or trespasses. However, in Luke's version of the prayer which we heard today, we see the word is 'sins.' This is not just a preference in translation. The Greek word used in Luke is a different word than in Matthew's version. Luke uses the more explicitly theological word 'sin.'

We are not as familiar with Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer since our practice in worship is to use Matthew's version to which the early church added the doxological ending adapted from David's prayer in today's Old Testament reading.

One of the significant things about Luke's version of the prayer is its location in the gospel itself. For those of you who have been in worship the last couple of weeks you know that we have been following a particular line of thought in Luke's gospel. It began with the dialogue between a certain

lawyer and Jesus about what must be done to inherit eternal life. They agreed that you must love God and love neighbor. Sounds simple, but it's not. So, the writer of Luke follows this dialogue with first the story of a certain man on the road to Jericho, and then the story of a certain woman who welcomed Jesus into her home in Bethany. The first story explores the challenges of loving neighbor and the second of loving God.

Now, immediately after these two stories, we come upon today's reading. Jesus has been praying in a certain place. (Luke is very interested in prayer and gives more emphasis to Jesus' practice of prayer than any of the other gospels.)

In response to Jesus' praying, one of the disciples asks Jesus to teach them (the disciples) to pray.

Jesus responds, "When you pray, say:

*Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone
indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.*

The structure of this prayer follows the theme that we have been following in Luke. It echoes Jesus' great commandment – to love God and to love neighbor. The first part of the prayer is about loving God and the second part is about loving one another.

Luke keeps bringing us back to this theme. In the dialogue with the lawyer, we see Jesus affirming this great commandment, which he believes is at the heart of the Jewish faith. Luke expands on each part of the commandment through the stories of the Good Samaritan and Mary & Martha. Now, Luke shows us how Jesus embeds the

practice of this commandment into the prayer he gives to his disciples. This is a prayer that is meant to sustain them in their daily discipleship in living out this great commandment. It is a prayer that has stayed with disciples through the centuries.

Although this prayer is intensely personal it is not private. It is not a "you-and-me God" prayer. Throughout the prayer the references to humans are in the plural, "give us...forgive us...do not lead us..." This is a prayer concerning all people.

Although the word "Our" is not included right at the beginning in the earliest manuscripts of Luke's version, it is implicitly there. When I say this prayer to God, I am not praying to my private God. Rather, I am praying to 'our God.' That means as we enter this prayer we find ourselves standing side-by-side before God not only with our friends, but also with those who irritate us, those who have wronged us and those whom we have wronged, and even those whom we consider enemies. To pray to "Our God" sets us off on a risky adventure. If we mean it, we should find ourselves on the edge of our pews, rather than daydreaming about lunch.

Each line of this prayer could be a sermon unto itself, but for today, let's consider, briefly, the second petition about our life together:

Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

This is a profoundly risky and challenging thing to pray. We say it routinely each week, but do we consider what we are really saying. This petition speaks to our individual sins. It speaks to our collective sins. It speaks to our brokenness as individuals and as a human species. It speaks to our need to be forgiven

as well as a call to forgive. Sometimes it is harder to offer forgiveness. Sometimes it is harder to accept forgiveness. Embodying forgiveness is a life long practice.

We know that there are individuals and whole groups of people caught in generations of violence and revenge. Jesus lived in the middle of such communities. He knew what he was calling for in this prayer. He was challenging those of us who follow him to a radically different way of life.

No matter what I say this morning there is no way to address the depth of pain and the complexity of practicing forgiveness in the face of many of the world's evils. That is an ongoing conversation. So, I want to share an example of one person's experience with practicing forgiveness with a friend.

In her book, [A Place to Pray: Reflections on the Lord's Prayer](#), Roberta Bondi writes about a time in her life when she was in conflict with a friend, whom she felt had "done her wrong," so to speak. Roberta had stewed about it. She had prayed about it. She had tried and hoped to forget about it. Yet, she was still troubled. She had not yet talked to her friend, whom she calls Jane Anne, because she was afraid to.

Then one day in her time of prayer, with her conflict with Jane Anne on her heart, Roberta said what caught her was the very first word of the Lord's Prayer – "Our." Suddenly, there was a shift in perception. She realized that in saying this prayer she was praying not just to her God, but also to Jane Anne's God; that she and Jane Anne were there together in the presence of God. She began to experience less internal anguish; yet, it also led her in a direction she had been avoiding.

She realized that this situation was not simply a matter of her own internal process of

feeling hurt, wishing she could simply forget, and wondering how to forgive. She came to see more fully that it was about her relationship with her neighbor; that she had to talk with Jane Anne, which she did.

Roberta goes on to say it was a very difficult conversation. However, they were able to work through the conflict and open a new future for their relationship with one another. Ultimately, forgiveness is about the possibility of a new future. Forgiveness is not forgetting, it is not dismissing the wrong or the pain it caused. It is opening the possibility for a new future, even if there isn't direct reconciliation. It is being unbound from the past.

I appreciate Robert Bondi's witness to the complexity and the challenge involved in the process of forgiveness. Yet, we have to acknowledge that sometimes it is not possible to talk with the person who has harmed you – it is too dangerous or the person has died. It may not be possible to have a future that involves reconciliation with the other person. Especially, in these situations where the evil is too great, we need the rest of the community to be engaged in the work of forgiveness with us and sometimes on our behalf. When we pray "Our" in the Lord's Prayer everyone is there – those who have committed transgressions, and those who have suffered transgressions, and all parts of each of us that are both. And the rest of the whole community is there as well.

Wow, is that what we're saying when we pray the Lord's Prayer? And that's only one of the petitions, and only a scratching of the surface of that petition. The others are equally challenging. We should be careful what we pray. At the beginning of the sermon I suggested that when someone asks you to pray, you can always pray the Lord's Prayer. It's safe. Or is it?