

## A Prayer for Our Times?

We had a discussion at a Worship and Christian Education meeting earlier this year about the Lord's Prayer. As adults, especially those of us getting up there in years, it rolls off our tongues easily. We have heard it and repeated it so many times that we can do it without thinking – not that this is a good thing! We said it every morning in the public schools that I attended – right after singing God Save the Queen. Times have changed, of course, and so our children and grandchildren probably wouldn't even recognize God save the Queen and they are only likely to hear this prayer on Sunday morning at church. Hearing something once a week is not the best way to commit it to memory... and then we realized that in our service, we waited until the children had left the sanctuary to say it. It was the way we ended our "Prayers of the People". We decided at that meeting to move the Lord's Prayer to the end of the "Time for the Young at Heart", a place where we could intentionally include the children in reciting it.

Now, some of you might think this was a good idea... and some might think that the prayer is outdated and not really relevant anymore – so why bother?

It's true that it is a very old prayer – more than 2000 years old – and the language is archaic. It's full of words like "Father" and "Lord" which speak of patriarchal and oppressive systems. And that's a fair argument. It was written in a time much different from our own. Some modern writers have paraphrased the prayer and replaced those words with ones that sound better to our modern ears. There are some beautiful ones out there. Is it time to change this prayer and choose something new? Is it even appropriate for today?

This version of the Lord's Prayer in our reading from Luke this morning is very bare bones. The one we recite more closely follows Matthew's rendering. And yet, it is still recognizable as the same prayer. In fact, I will take the liberty of combining both versions a bit this morning as I explore these words we know so well.

In the reading that we heard this morning from the book of Luke, the disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." We know that prayer was an important part of the Jewish faith, so this wasn't a totally new concept. But I think they were asking for something more than the words to say – and I think that's something we can relate to even today. I know I have struggled from time to time with my own prayers – Where to begin? How can I express what I feel and need and want? Who am I addressing this to anyway? How can I be sure that I'm being heard? ...

Jesus begins with the words and the words are chosen carefully...

"Our Father..."

Interesting that he doesn't address God as some majestic far away ruler but as a parent, someone with whom you are in an intimate relationship, someone who knows you through and through, someone you can be honest and open with. It was not a completely new concept for Jesus' listeners; God is described at times in the Old Testament as the Father of Israel and as caring for the people in the way a caring parent would. But God is also referred to as a master and ruler. Well, we approach a king in a very different way from the way we approach our

parents. Jesus is encouraging his disciples to approach God in an intimate way, as someone who loves us and cares for us and is ready to listen rather than someone who makes decisions with a distant and arbitrary hand.

We know that this term “Father” is not an easy one for some people. We all understand that not everyone grows up with a father who is present and loving and concerned with the well-being of his family – but we also know that this is the ideal of what a father should be and if anyone was going to reach that ideal, it would be God. God may not be like the father you know in your own life, but Jesus knows that God is the perfect Father we all need and deserve.

“Our Father, who art in heaven”

Heaven, that ideal place where we would all like to be. Some believe it is a reward for a life well-lived, others don’t believe it exists at all. It’s one of those mysteries we cannot answer for sure until our life here ends but I think the important thing about this concept is actually in the part that says, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...” It’s a desire for the perfection we perceive of as heaven to be right here with us on Earth. And we all know that Jesus believed that we all have a role to play in making things happen. So, it’s also a call to action, a request to give us the clarity, the strength, and the courage to take the kind of steps needed to bring life here on Earth closer to the ideal that God wishes for us. It’s an acknowledgement that we pray with words but we also need to pray with our hands and our feet.

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

In Jesus’ time, and for the audience he was addressing, just having enough food for the day was a huge concern. And when you are having difficulty filling a basic need for yourself and your family, it’s really hard to do anything else or think about anything else. For most of us here in this congregation, this isn’t something we need to worry about. It is an important reminder to us, however, that this shouldn’t be an issue for anyone. There are enough resources in the world to feed all people. The problem is that we don’t share those resources in an equitable way... even in our own communities. I was shocked to hear on the radio just this week that the riding of Ottawa-Vanier – right here in our city– has the highest food bank use per capita of all the ridings in Ontario. And just in case you think it’s a problem in just one low-income part of the nation’s capital, Ottawa South and Ottawa West-Nepean also rank in the top ten. 35, 550 people from those three ridings visited food banks last year... here in Canada’s capital... here in our own neighbourhood... often people who are working, who are trying hard to make ends meet. Food shouldn’t be a luxury – especially when we know there is plenty to go around.

“Give us this day our daily bread – all of us”

“Forgive us our sins” – or in some translations, our trespasses or our debts – as we forgive those who do these things against us.

Forgiveness – the Hebrew word that is translated this way can also be translated as “release”, particularly in releasing a debt. I find that a powerful change in the nuance, the connotation of that word Forgiveness. I can ask for forgiveness but, unless there is a real change in the way my forgiver and I relate to one another and a sense within myself that I can let go of the guilt I feel for what I have done, well, I’m not really released at all. Release, for me, is closer to what I see as grace – the grace that God has that wipes away what has been done and lets me start with a fresh, clean slate. It’s a really hard thing for us humans to do, whether we are the forgiver or the forgiven. It’s hard to go back to the way things were, to release each other and ourselves from the hurt or the breach of trust... but Jesus tells us that this is something God can do and something we need to try to do as well in order for life to move forward in a better way. So... this prayer asks for the forgiveness of our own debts, or trespasses, or sins in the way that God’s grace allows and urges us to do the same for others.

Luke ends this prayer with “Do not bring us to the time of trial” where we use Matthew’s “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” A plea to God to make things easier for us as we try our best to live out the Christian ideals of loving God and loving our neighbour as ourself. It was a difficult road in Jesus’ time and is no less difficult for us in today’s world. I see this as a request for strength and courage and persistence to keep us on this path we have chosen, this path that is crucial to creating God’s kingdom – or kin-dom – here in our earthly, and earthy, world. You would think that we might have made progress on this journey in 2000 years and, perhaps we have with the growth of democracy and the advancements in science and medicine – but, listening to the news lets us know in no uncertain terms that we have a long way to go - and the journey is made all that more difficult when some use the name of Christianity but twist the message in a way that does anything but show love for neighbour.

The prayer that Jesus taught is old for sure... it is even archaic. It uses words that can make us feel uncomfortable in this age of inclusivity. The message is still relevant, if we dig down a bit, but that message could probably be better understood if we used modern terms that people today could relate to...

But, I have to admit that I still love it just the way it is. For me, there is something both comforting and empowering about being able to recite a prayer together with others. Even though it has been translated into many, many languages, we can say this prayer together with others all over the world. The cadence remains the same, the rhythm and the phrasing are often recognizable to us even if the language is one we don’t understand. Often Reverend Kim will announce the prayer inviting you to say it in the language of your choice – and it works.

It’s a tradition that links us in a very real way to those disciples who sat with Jesus all those years ago. I find that kind of amazing! It’s a tradition that links us to Christians all over the world. And that’s pretty cool too.

The biggest problem for me is that ability to let it roll off my tongue without really giving it any thought at all. It’s so easy to forget, really, that we are praying, that we are taking time as a community to communicate with that intimate and yet universal presence that we refer to as

God. Prayer is not, after all, simply about the words being said. It's about the person who is doing the praying and that person's relationship with that Holy Mystery. It's about the commitment that exists between the pray-er and the pray-ee.

The Hebrew word used in today's passage that we translate as "prayer" is *tefillah* (*t'feel AH*). It means to beg, to beseech, to implore. It is not the calm, quiet prayer of the comfortable but the cry of the desperate. It means to pray urgently and to pray in the belief that our prayer will be heard and that it will be answered. It's not the kind of prayer that should roll off our tongues without thought. In all the beauty of having a prayer that is shared by Christians all over the world and in the wonder of being able to trace the words right back to those who sat at Jesus' feet, the risk is that we take those words for granted, that they become rote and lose their meaning and the urgency with which they were intended. If we say the words without meaning, how can we expect God to hear them any differently.

This story from Luke doesn't end with the words of the prayer. Jesus goes on to share the example of a friend waking you in the middle of the night asking to borrow bread to feed an unexpected visitor. It would be easy to say, "Go away, I'm trying to sleep!" – but if the person knocking at the door considers you to be a good friend, one who you know would help you in any way they can, then they will keep knocking until you are fully awake. And if you are in a true friend relationship with them, of course you will open the door and lend them what they need. Sometimes you've got to be persistent, Jesus is telling his listeners, and you need to make your case clear.

"Lord, teach us to pray," the disciples asked Jesus at the beginning of this passage in Luke. Jesus gives them words, yes, but he also gives them instructions about how to use those words. "Seek and ye shall find; knock and the door will be opened to you" – be persistent, know that the one you are praying to will want to help... if that's the way it works with friends and family, what would make you think that God wouldn't be even more inclined to answer our prayers? I think the point is to speak up and make your case, muttering under your breath isn't terribly convincing – just ask any parent.

Yes, there are newer prayers, ones that are easier for us to understand and relate to perhaps, but there is no other prayer that we share with our brothers and sisters all over the world or with those men and women who followed Jesus so many years ago. I will certainly pray in other ways but I'm not ready to let go of this one.

Think back to earlier this morning when we said "the prayer that Jesus taught" with our children... were you fully engaged? Was the feeling you had one of comfort or did it reflect the desperate needs of this world we live in today?

I think I'd like to give it one more try... please join me

Our Father, who art in heaven  
Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive our trespasses  
As we forgive those who trespass against us.  
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory  
Forever and ever

Amen.