

GOSPEL OF LUKE - Luke Knight

Praying with Jesus | Luke 11. 1-4 | January 16, 2022

I'm not sure how we learn how to pray. We probably pick up patterns from all kinds of places and people. Do we pray like we talk with our parents, whatever a parent has been to us? Do we pray like we talk with our friends, at least the ones who will listen? Do we pray like we talk to the CRA, with reluctance and trepidation? Prayer is different things to all of us. To some, prayer is largely law, something we *should do* or else; a kind of obligation we had better attend to to keep in God's good books, which can lead to a feeling of objectification. To others, prayer is largely a list; an asking for what we want and nothing much more, where God (ideally) is on demand and as reliable as Amazon, and in a sense where *God* is now somewhat objectified. For others prayer is lonely, because it's so very quiet and we ask, as Welsh poet and priest R.S. Thomas asked, *"Is this where God hides / From my searching?"* because *"There is no other sound / In the darkness but the sound of a man / Breathing, testing his faith / On emptiness, nailing his questions / One by one to an untenanted cross."* Or is prayer something else? Not all law, not all list, or all loneliness, but also *love* - the space we enter to be held, reassured, and shaped? For most of us, prayer is probably a messy mix of all four.

Thankfully we're given a few life rafts for prayer, one of which is the prayer Jesus gave his first followers when they asked him *how they* should pray. And when we stop to think about it, why would we start anywhere else but Jesus' feet, as Mary did in the story just ahead of these words? That story reminds us, among other things, that we don't need a certain GPA to get into Jesus' school of prayer, or have a certain background or sex. Everyone can pray with Jesus. That's part of what we're seeing in the Mary and Martha story from last week. Not only has Mary chosen the "best thing", prioritizing Jesus, she's been prioritized *by* Jesus, made room for along with the men. As with some other women, Mary was as close to Jesus as almost anyone, given the same information and authority. Mary's not just at Jesus' feet for a sweet little devotional moment. She's placed there to learn and pass on everything Jesus brings. And given the many challenges we still face when it comes to inequity between the sexes, and inequity in general, we should let stories like this shape our practice increasingly.

We're told often in Luke's gospel that Jesus prayed all the time and in various ways. He slips away from the crowds to pray (5.12-16), he spends whole nights in prayer (6.6-13), he prays all alone (9.12-18), he prays spontaneously (10.21), and he prays in the middle of a crisis (22.39-46). And it seems Jesus' patterns reflect someone who related to prayer in terms of dependence rather than discipline, alignment rather than demand, and obedience rather than obligation. However he prayed, his disciples were watching and they asked him to teach *them* how to pray. What results is the prayer recorded in Matthew and Luke's gospels and has been shown by recent scholarship not simply to be a prayer, but the very shape of Jesus' mission itself, passed into the lives of his first followers. The prayer reflects Israel's history, Jesus' fulfillment of Israel's vocation, and the new Exodus and kingdom he is leading people into. As others have said, how we pray will tell us a fair bit about how we live. So the idea might

be that by giving attention to this prayer, *The Lord's prayer*, we're not only learning how to pray as Jesus would have us pray, but are learning how to live as Jesus would have us live.

We'll spend the next few weeks in Jesus' prayer, but today we'll begin with an overview of the whole thing – just enough to get us going this week if we've never prayed it, or for others a refresher on what's going in such familiar words.

(Our) Father in heaven, holy is your name

As one writer puts it, "To pray *Our Father* is to pray as Jesus prayed and to stand where Jesus stands."ⁱⁱ And where Jesus stands is the place where he hears a voice which says "this is my dearly loved child, who I am very pleased with". Because of Jesus, those very words ring out over every Christian too. So the prayer begins not with a *what*, *why*, *how* or *when*, but with a *who*. How do you start a conversation? By name. We all know how disappointing or even painful it is when someone we hope we have a connection with either doesn't know or doesn't use our name. To be known is first to be named and we are told to name God as Father, the one who calls humans his children (Hosea 11), and Israel his firstborn child (Exodus 4.22). Who is God? Our loving Father, parent of all creation. Who are we? Dearly loved children, standing in Jesus' name, whom God is smiling over. We can't move into the rest of the prayer until we grasp God's character and the immediate intended intimacy in those opening words.

And this character, this person named, is *holy*. We could spend weeks unearthing what holiness means to God, but today it might be enough to say that if someone is holy they are separate, differentiated, you could even say treasured. God is distinct from all creation, a source we can't pretend to *fully* understand, and therefore worthy of our *full* attention. A name unlike any other name. A being unlike any other being, with a character unlike any other character. To call God holy is to admit that God is not us and we are not God; to say that God is special, not just to us, but entirely special to everyone and everything.

And speaking of *us* we should also point out that prayer is always plural. Luke's gospel doesn't give us the "Our" ahead of "Father" as Matthew's does, but the shape of the whole prayer is still clearly communal in both versions. Prayer is never solitary, even when it feels lonely. We're always praying together to "Our Father", which means prayer takes us not only in God's direction but towards and alongside other people. Imagine the person praying with you, at this very moment, in China, in Ukraine, in Brazil. It's more than likely there's many churches talking about prayer, even praying the Lord's Prayer together at this very moment with us. As we'll see, praying Jesus' words not only sits us down in vulnerability with God, but with others, whether or not we're physically together. You could say that prayer is always something of a team building exercise.

Your kingdom come ("your will be done" on earth as in heaven, adds Matthew's gospel)

Just back in July we brought our second daughter home from hospital and introduced the siblings to each other. And even though our eldest was barely two, it wasn't long before she was involved in fetching diapers and talking to the baby – that very day. That's the kingdom of family life, and I'd imagine the more kids you have the more this happens. If you're in the family, you're about the family business.

Once named and known, right away we're tossed in at the deep end of God's family business. Right away Jesus' prayer sets the premise that God is up to something, and that we are a part of that something. So we're not starting with "forgive me" or "I need this" or "wouldn't you do something please about my awful co-worker", but the awareness that we're little parts of some very big goings on in the universe, outside of our limited experience of things. We are enlisted, you could say, into Jesus' mission in the world, the way he is taking things, aligning with Jesus, rather than asking Jesus to align with us. As another writer says, we might need to be dethroned by these words when we pray them. Our little kingdoms come into submission to God's kingdom, after all we are little bits of earth.ⁱⁱⁱ

So prayer is not first where we close in on God to narrow God down, but where God opens us up to the wide possibilities of his life *through* our lives. Which means that by praying Jesus' prayer, we'll find ourselves not so much praying and asking to know "God's will for *my* life" (though that's not a terrible thing to pray) but asking what Jesus' character looks like and how our choices might align with his way of going. An incredible amount of pressure is lifted by just praying "your kingdom come, your will be done". So many of us are hurried and tired, anxious that everything comes down to the dent we hope to make on the world, not least those of us the in young adult or teenager years. "What on earth am I supposed to do?" we ask. But this prayer reorients that question. In a way God's life and work fills up the foreground, as we recede a little to the background. It's what people who don't even pray within the Christian tradition might call "gaining perspective" through various meditative practices. And for the Christian this can be a great joy, also giving great purpose, where the pressure is lifted and possibilities open up. We can be anxious about a lot of things, which we'll get to in a moment, but something we never have to be anxious about as people of faith is whether or not we'll *matter*, that existential crisis we all face in various seasons of life, driving us into unhealthy ambition or selfish choices. We can be salespeople, nurses, spouses, teachers, lawyers, parents, tradespeople, business people, or students. Most of us will "do" a number of things in life. Various relationships, roles and careers. Jesus' prayer insists that it matters less *what exactly* we're doing, and more *how we do it*; how the light of Jesus' character filters through the stained glass lives we're crafting.

Give us today our daily bread

As mentioned earlier, there are plenty of things to be anxious about, and food on the table stands for all those needs we can't deny. This language is lifted from Exodus 16 when God makes food for the Hebrew people in the wilderness. It might also bring to mind Jesus' feeding the crowds who followed him around simply because they needed something. Tom Wright puts it this way:

"...this clause in the Lord's Prayer, reminds us that our natural longings, for bread and all that it symbolizes, are not to be shunned as though they were of themselves evil. God knows our desires in order that we may turn them into prayer; in order that they may be sorted out, straightened out, untangled and reaffirmed. We are taking the first steps from chaos of our normal interior life towards an order and clarity which will let the joy come through to the surface. In bringing them into the prayer within the setting of the earlier petitions for God's honour, his kingdom and his will, it asks for our desires to be satisfied in God's way and God's time. And, since God himself is most truly the object of our hunger, this clause asks that we may be fed with God himself. Once we put the prayer

for daily bread within the whole kingdom-prayer where it belongs, to turn then to the specific things we honestly need right now is not trivial. It is precisely what children do when they love and trust the one they call Father."^{iv}

So daily we can ask, and should ask, for what we need. Which might remind us again of prayer's intimacy and dependence. Another writer points out that there is power in a request, so asking itself is a powerful thing we shouldn't take lightly. Which is why we suspect Jesus tells the odd story about being persistent in asking for what we need or even want. After all, it's not as if we are interacting with some kind of cosmic vending machine. But at times we make so many rules for God and prayer and how we think it "works", we forget that we're made in the image of God, a person, we're not made in the image of a photocopier. What would you do if I asked you for something again and again? Would you give me what I'm asking for? Well who knows, but there's a lot of factors to consider, isn't there? So, we appeal to God's good character and trust he will give us what we need in due time. As any parent knows, sometimes a request is granted a child, and sometimes it isn't, for reasons often unapparent. As Dallas Willard writes, *"prayer is nothing but a proper way for persons to interact."* When we ask, we ask as persons to a person, and avoid objectification in the process, growing in intimacy and trust.

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive those indebted against us

Once we ask for what we need, the bread of grace being chief among our needs, we're immediately faced with what others might need from us – which is also grace. We've got a real knack of pulling God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others apart. Jesus told a pretty harrowing story about this kind of thing in the parable of the unmerciful debtor in Matthew 18. And when you read that story it sounds a bit ridiculous, that someone let off the hook in such dramatic fashion would have such a short memory that they are absolutely unwilling to let someone else off the hook the very next moment. Sometimes Jesus' stories are meant to sound a little ridiculous to point out the sheer silliness of how we go about things. So the words about forgiveness in Jesus' prayer are as intentional as any. Forgiveness is not an isolated incident between God and me, forgiveness is the freedom I've been led into, again, this new Exodus. As others have pointed out, *refusing to free one another* is in a way to deny our own freedom, to serve someone salt water, when God's given you fresh water. You'll remember the part about the kingdom at the beginning, and forgiveness is massive part of that kingdom. If we're enlisted into that kingdom, that family, and if we're asking for that kingdom to press up through our very lives, offering and receiving forgiveness continually is something we'd better get used to. And remembering again that our praying tells us about our living, this the main way in which prayer leads us further into community and intimacy, rather than away from it. The only thing that gets in the way of intimacy is hurt. And without forgiveness, healing, we'll remain a long way off from each other. Forgiveness is the way the kingdom grows.

And do not lead us into the time of trial or temptation, (but rescue us from the evil one)

The ending here in Luke's version another reminder that this isn't simply a prayer, but the shape of Jesus' whole mission in the world. Tom Wright also points out that Jesus' himself asked to be delivered from his trials, but wasn't, and faced the cross. The wonderful news there is that we can ask for deliverance and hear "yes" because Jesus heard "no". So this is an obvious request for God lead us away from very trying times which come at the hands of evil in the world. And it bares remembering that

there is plenty of evil both outside us and inside us we might need to be saved from! But the prayer here is for *deliverance*, which again tells us that *deliverance, freedom, renewal* is the end game in God's kingdom, a kingdom not fully evident, but pressing up as grass through hard ground. So the end of this prayer carries with it the hope of heaven, of new creation. We pray to be safely led through the crucible and into rest. Why pray for new possibilities if there is no hope of them ahead? For me, this last line stirs up the image of a child in the dark, or maybe in an overwhelming crowd, looking and grasping for their parent's hand. In prayer the hand is grasped, held, and led, sometimes pulled along, away from danger, through the darkness toward light.

For today, I think we'll stop there as a kind of general overview. Kirsten, Dave and Rikk will be digging in further in the coming weeks, which will no doubt be really helpful. There is always more to say and learn about the Lord's Prayer. And the temptation is to do a lot of talking about it, and never settle down to praying it. And if praying is really also about living, then it's in our best interest as Jesus' followers to get praying this prayer as quickly as possible and to see what then happens to our living.

I will say I've never found praying the Lord's Prayer easy. It's always a mix of comforting reassurance and honest realignment. There is a term used in various coaching schools which applies quite well to prayer I think, and this prayer in particular. When we pray Jesus' prayer we are safe, but not always comfortable. We're safe, in that we are known and loved and secure with our Father. We're safe because he isn't negligent and provision is at the ready. But we're not always comfortable because this is God we're talking with, and we're expecting some good parenting, good leadership in this relationship. We're shaped, we're reformed into that family likeness we sometimes try so hard to forget about ourselves, the image of God, the likeness of Jesus. So when we pray this prayer, live this prayer, we're safe but not always comfortable, and that's the place where we can expect to grow.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. We talked about prayer feeling like "law, list, lonely, or love". What has prayer been like for you?
2. What stood out to you about the Lord's prayer?
3. What about this prayer connects with your experience right now?
4. How should a prayer like this inform our communal life as a church?

ⁱ *In Church*, R.S. Thomas

ⁱⁱ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian*

ⁱⁱⁱ Tom Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*

^{iv} Tom Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*