

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Joshua Narcisse
Sunday, November 14, 2021

Matthew 6:7-13

“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

Come Thou fount of every blessing. Tune my heart to sing Thy praise. Streams of mercy never ceasing. Lord, You call for songs of loudest praise. So, teach me some melodious sonnet sung by flaming tongues above. Lord, here's Your mount I'm fixed upon it, mount of Thy redeeming love. And so, God of grace and God of glory, speak now to Your children a word that will comfort and correct, a word that will challenge us, and send us out to do Your work, to follow after You. This we pray in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

I can remember my first encounter with the Lord's Prayer. It was in the basement of the Dunton Presbyterian Church in the back right hand side corner of the Fellowship Hall. That's where elementary age students would gather for Sunday school lessons every Sunday morning before worship. Each Sunday we'd gather for lessons, memory verses, and prayer with Mrs. Lily Bain, Mrs. Annie Miller, and Miss Mary Bryant. As we were taught the foundations of the faith by these three faithful church ladies, who each week gave themselves to the work of raising up the younger church. It was in the basement of the Dunton Presbyterian Church, in the back right hand side corner of the fellowship hall, that I first remember being taught the Lord's Prayer. When did you first encounter the Lord's Prayer? Who taught it to you? Where did those words first fall upon your ears? I asked these questions because I'm sure that if you think long enough, answers will begin to flow to the forefront of your mind because the Lord's Prayer is so central, so fundamental to our collective experience as followers of Christ that if you pause long enough I'm convinced that you will be able to call to mind your earliest memories of learning, reciting ,and praying the Lord's Prayer.

“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 us our debts, as we forgive those who are our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Joshua Narcisse
Sunday, November 14, 2021

That's the prayer we just heard. That's the prayer I was taught. That's the way I was told is the right way to, but after learning it I had no clue what to do with that prayer because Thy, Thou, and art don't really mean much to a first grader unless you're talking about Crayola crayons.

Things can get even more confusing if you, like me, went to a Catholic school where the Lord's prayer is simply called 'Our Father' and it doesn't talk about forgive us our debts, but, rather, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. There are differences, Beloved, in versions. Differences in languages, differences and practices, differences that ought to remind you and I as believers that this prayer is not some empty ritual we observe, nor words we're merely fond of reciting mindlessly over and over. This prayer is a model for how we ought to pray. This is the Lord's Prayer, a discursive framework for how to pray with purpose and with power.

It's more than words to memorize. It's more than the words we use to close our time with the younger church. It's more than just standard liturgy for the service of the Lord's day. The Lord's Prayer is the model Christ offers us to help direct and structure our conversations with God and our responsibility to one another. The Lord's Prayer is the answer to the question raised in this sermonic moment, how shall we pray? We pray the Lord's Prayer. We pray in the way the Lord taught us, and that is to pray prayers that are purposeful, that are particular, and that are political. Beloved, we are called to pray prayers that are purposeful. Step back with me for a moment and take a wide view of this text. Consider the weight of the petitions we make each time we recite the Lord's Prayer. We ask God to demonstrate God's singular sovereignty in our lives and in the world. We ask God to provide for the daily sustenance, the food, nourishment, and material resources that make drawing our breath possible. We ask God to release us from the economic shackles of debt that keep alive the idols of ruthless capitalism and excessive materialism. We ask God to give us enough strength to resist the temptation to live as if God isn't who God says that He is.

We ask God for each of these things every time we say the Lord's Prayer, and there is a temptation to act as if this is just another prayer that we say. Beloved, the Lord's Prayer is a prayer offered to God in the expectation that God will indeed intervene in this world and right the wrong ways we've organized it, reconcile us to one another into relationships that honor God, and release us from the power of sin and death that so often pursue us along this life's journey. And if this is the paradigmatic prayer Christ offers us, if this is the model of prayer Christ invites us to participate in, then the question I put to you this morning is simply this. What kind of prayers have you been praying?

How purposefully have you been engaged in a practice of prayer? Why are you praying the prayers that you've prayed?

We're called to pray prayers that are purposeful prayers, that concern the most crucial things in our lives. Prayers that desire to unsettle the world around us so that God's will may indeed be done, and God's kingdom might indeed come to reign and rule here and right now.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Joshua Narcisse
Sunday, November 14, 2021

We're called to pray prayers that are purposeful, and we're called to pray prayers that are particular. The Reverend Dr. Bernard Richardson, Dean of the Chapel at Howard University, would often tell us as students our prayers should be as messy as our lives. What Dean Richardson was trying to tell us as students, and what I offer you this morning is that the prayers God desires of us are not required to be eloquent. The grammar and syntax don't necessarily have to agree, but what is required of us when we pray is that our prayers emanate from the depth of that vulnerable and tender place that only God can touch. For there is in each of us a space a space too deep for human hands a space so intimate where only you and God reside. It's in that space, that intimate space, our prayers ought to flow, for it is there that the particular needs of our little lives are seen by our God who is always near to us. And what I believe, is that when we emerge from that space of divine intimacy, is that what is most particular to our experiences, what is most particular to our needs, our desires, our brokenness, our struggles with sin, will be most often shared in common by those around us. That's why, though, the pronouns used in the Lord's Prayer are plural. We, us, our. The impact of those prayers resonates with each of us intimately because they concern the most particular things.

We confess that God is our father because we have each claimed God for ourselves as my father. We pray that God will give us our daily bread. As we are praying that God will supply the bread on my table, the clothes on my back, the material needs that I hold as non-negotiable, we pray in the plural because the Lord's prayer is particular to what is for you and I most personal and near. We pray in the plural because we each know that the particular needs that you experience are needs shared by your neighbor.

If it is Christ who calls us to pray in the plural, then we ought to recognize that Christ is also calling us to respond to these needs that are risen in our midst. Beloved ones, what is it that you need God to do in your life? What is it that you need God to heal? What is it that you don't quite have the words to petition God for? What requests are laden down with too much shame, too burdened with pain? I challenge you to begin praying that God would touch those things for you, and for someone else pray for healing of your body, and the healing of the body of your fellow church member. Pray for financial stability for yourself and the person who delivers your mail. Pray for peace of mind for yourself and for the people who stock the grocery shelves. Pray for yourself and for one another because I believe God's heart is moved when our prayers emanate from our most personal needs. And don't stop there, but extend beyond the personal pronouns of me, myself, and I. We're called to pray prayers that are purposeful.

We're called to pray prayers that are particular, but, beloved, we are also called to pray prayers that are political. Yes, prayers that are political, not partisan, but political prayers that concern the social economic, legal, and civic institutions that govern and guide our daily lives. Political prayers let us return to the words of the Lord's Prayer, for the first words we recite and the first petition we make is "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name." To be sure God does not require our help in making God's name hallowed in the world, but Christ doesn't tell us to pray that God's name is hallowed because God needs our help. Rather, we are told to pray 'hallowed be your name' because we ought to always pray that God and God alone is centered as the sovereign head of our life, and the catalyst for how we organize the world in which we live.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Joshua Narcisse
Sunday, November 14, 2021

Christ tells the disciples to pray God's name be hallowed because in the world of first century Israel, the holiness of God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was seen as a direct threat to the manufactured holiness of Caesar and thus to the power of Rome. And so to pray each day "Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" was to call for the dismantling of the way Rome exerted influence and control over the people of Israel, and to pray that God's divine power would be made perfect in their lives. In other words, to say the Lord's Prayer is to pray a political prayer. In other words, it is to pray a prayer that disrupts the malicious machinations of those who reproduce human misery and excess. In other words, it is to pray a prayer that asks God to expose the injustice codified and what masquerades as a criminal justice system. In other words, it is to pray a prayer that calls for the casting down of a nationalism that acts as if it is true religion. We are called, beloved, to pray political prayers that invoke the spirit of the Barman Declaration, the statement of faith of the confessing church in response to the terror of Nazi Germany, that proclaims we reject the false doctrines as though there were areas of our life and which we would not belong to Jesus Christ.

We pray prayers that call for a better kind of politics, a politics where the poor receive good news, where the captives are set free, where the blinded have recovered sight, and the oppressed savor freedom. How shall we pray, Idlewild? We pray prayers that are purposeful, particular, and political.

Now I'm aware that for some, none of what I've lifted up this morning may resonate, and you're still wrestling with our sermonic question of how shall we pray. If indeed this is the case, I leave you with the words of Sister Sue. Sister Sue is an almost 90-year-old nun who cared for Henry Nouwen in his later life. I had the pleasure of meeting Sister Sue on a Zoom call a few weeks ago. She joined a group of friends of Church Health who have become part of my family. We've been meeting for almost three years now and discussing the writings of Richard Rohr, and we've also found our way talking about Victor Frankl and Rumi and Cynthia Bourgeault and Howard Thurman and Henry Nouwen, and we've been wandering for a while. But Sister Sue joined us a few weeks ago to talk about her experience of living with Henri Nouwen and enduring that call. She shared with us pieces of her life, a life not only spent caring for Henri Nouwen, but also living in community with folks who were differently able and who needed assistance going about their daily tasks. For nearly 70 years, Sister Sue did this work until finally her mortality caught up with her, and her body would no longer allow her to keep the pace needed to sustain this work. And so, one day, she found herself, like many of us, bargaining with God. She said 'Well God, since you've let this body get old and I can't work anymore, I guess it's about time that I start praying.' The problem was that, by Sister Sue's own account, she was absolutely terrible at praying. She never could quite find the right words to say, or the right posture to take, or the right time to pray. There were no fuzzy feelings in her stomach, no arm tingling in her chest. Every time she prayed it just didn't feel right, but Sister Sue was committed to praying for an hour each day. A whole hour. She's a real good Christian. So, Sister Sue, like most of us, started praying for a list of people near to her. When she got done, she looked up at the clock, and 10 minutes had passed. So, she made another list of all the concerns of the world that she could think of, and began praying, and when she looked up 10 more minutes had passed. So, she got

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Joshua Narcisse
Sunday, November 14, 2021

up, put her list aside, and quit praying for that day. But the next day she came back. This time she didn't pick up her list. She didn't try to begin linking words together in prayer. This time she picked up her Bible. She opened it to the Gospel of John and found herself reading a familiar passage, "Abide in me as I abide in you." Since that day, Sister sue said she's had no problem praying because she isn't focused on the how. She's not concerned about the mechanics of prayer. She focuses each day on a practice of being with God. There it is. I hope you haven't missed it, for that's where we begin. How do we pray if the Lord's Prayer just doesn't cut it for you? Begin by abiding, by taking the risk to remain with God, to journey with God, to linger with God, and not to depart when God points you toward the places within yourself that are still inconsolable; not to the part when God does not allow you to turn away from the desolation and brokenness of this world when it feels awkward uncomfortable, when it feels empty, and even foolish. You pray first by abiding, and when you learn to abide in God you will recognize the fingerprints of god all over and within yourself. Beloved, praying the Lord's Prayer is not how you pray. Begin first by abiding in the promise that at some point you will find God there, and know that those familiar words that we pray will not be a barrier, but will serve as an invitation to journey deeper into God and into relationship with one another.

Now having heard these things, hear now the Lord's prayer afresh. Our Father who art in heaven make yourself known in our lives. May your divine judgment come forth, unseating the wicked, breaking the chains of those who oppress, and freeing us all from our complicity and systems of human misery. May your kingdom come, may your will be done, as we seek to form relationships that honor you, as we care for one another. So may this be right here as it already is where you are. Give us each day enough to make it Grant us food on our tables, clothes for these bodies, and an economy that provides for everyone, not just those who have enough, and release us from the shackles of debt. May we no longer be subject to loans and scams and policies that keep us from knowing financial freedom in this lifetime and give us the power to forgive those who owe us, that we may be more like you in the ways we steward our resources and give us the strength to resist the seductions of this world the temptation to take more than we give, the temptation to treat people as if they are not made in your image, the temptation to love with conditions and to grieve without hope, the temptation to live as if the resurrection is not the reality of our lives, and deliver us from the evils that we know of and those that we know not of and those that we know as part of ourselves. It is in Christ's name, and in this way, that we do pray. Amen.