

## "Teach Us To Pray"

A meditation based on The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:5-15; Luke 11:1-13; and Didache 8:2b-3

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Once upon a time, or rather, many times upon many times, Jesus and his disciples squirreled themselves away from the pressing crowds, away from the requests for healing, away from the stresses of living under the oppression of the Roman Empire. Time after time, so the gospels record, Jesus and his closest friends went away to pray. Jesus especially did so...and the others naturally followed along. On one such occasion, or so we are told, the disciples noticed Jesus praying, and when he was finished they asked him, "teach us to pray also..."

Once upon a time, or rather, a few times over and over these past several years, you members and friends of Redlands United Church of Christ have asked the same through your covenants, "teach us to pray...teach us about prayer...we want to learn to pray..." This year, the requests were plentiful. Hence the additional prayer group which begins this coming Tuesday evening. And hence this Lenten series of five meditations focusing on what has come to be called "The Lord's Prayer." Today, we'll explore two possible contexts for the familiar prayer, and in subsequent weeks we'll look together at the four specific sections that make up this beloved prayer.

The Lord's Prayer, which we've heard this morning in each of its three original versions, is usually attributed to Jesus himself, although the scholars of the Jesus Seminar and others now agree that it probably did not originate with him. Surprisingly, most pastors, including me until I started here, have been taught the rote introduction to use when offering the pastoral

prayer leading into the Lord's Prayer. We say, almost without thinking, "Hear us now as we pray the prayer Jesus taught..." and Christians across this nation pray on cue like well-rehearsed voice choirs. On one of my first Sundays in this congregation, one of our longtime members—a biblical scholar of sorts himself—approached me after the service and taught me that Jesus probably did teach his disciples to pray, but he probably did not use this particular prayer to do so because the prayer itself is not that old and it would be great if I could reflect that reality in my future prayer introductions. I was delighted that 1) this is a congregation that keeps up on current biblical scholarship, and 2) this is a congregation not afraid to share the task of teaching and learning the faith! We are on this journey together, and the body is stronger when each of us takes a share of the load.

Our brother in faith was correct! Other scholars confirm that Jesus would have used any of the dozens of Jewish prayers readily available as teaching tools for his eager students. In characteristic form, Jesus may very well have "tweaked" the customary prayers, urging his disciples to call God by a more familiar term, for example, or entreating them to do whatever they could to bring the Kingdom of God to earth; for these are some of the unique aspects of the Lord's Prayer that have survived the edits of countless copiers throughout the centuries. We'll get to those finer points in the next few weeks.

For today, I invite us to take a birds-eye or wide-angle view of this prayer we pray each Sunday morning. Stepping back and looking at each of the three passages read this morning, we see that one context for the prayer is the classroom; in this case, the late first century classroom, comprised of the second- and third-generations of Christ's followers. The Matthew version of the prayer was written between the years 80 and 100 CE, some 50-70 years after Christ lived. The Gospel of Matthew was compiled for and within the Jewish-Christian community that had merged to serve the needs of their surrounding Gentile (or non-believer) neighbors. These believers may have lived in Palestine, or perhaps Syria, or even as far away

as Egypt. They were relatively wealthy and lived in an urban setting...this we know from the type of language and the style of the writing used within the gospel. Not surprisingly, the prayer itself is set within what is arguably the most well-known of Jesus' teaching sessions: the Sermon on the Mount. Take a moment sometime and scan through Matthew, chapters 5-7, and you'll see the equivalent of a first-century outlined lesson plan. Want to know what is important in following Christ? It's all right there, from the beatitudes to the saltiness to the restating of the Hebrew laws to love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself. The Lord's Prayer is part of this early teaching. The authors of Matthew place it as a capstone on the discussion of piety and the practice of one's faith. They caution early believers and we who follow in their footsteps to be careful about public displays which serve only to brag about our faith. Give generously in secret. Pray often in secret. Forgive others in secret. Fast in secret. Whatever spiritual disciplines help bring you closer to God, do them with gusto...and in secret...so teach the authors of Matthew. No trumpets, no fanfare, no personal appearances on Oprah to expound...just go away...in secret...as did Christ after whom we are called. This is the teaching context of Matthew's version of the prayer.

Turning to Luke, we see a similar and more direct classroom context. Set within a story in which Jesus prays, one of the disciples politely waits till Jesus is finished praying, then boldly appeals on behalf of the others, "Lord, teach us to pray..." In the story, Jesus grants the request with rather uncomplicated, yet provocative, statements. Again, we'll look closely at those specific petitions as this series unfolds. For today, it is sufficient for us to note that Jesus is portrayed here as teacher, and prayer is the chosen methodology of teaching the essential values of his ministry to those later followers.

The Lucan version of the prayer was probably written in the mid-eighties, possibly a bit prior to the Matthew text. While the authors of Matthew portray Jesus as a new Moses who fulfills scripture and establishes a new authority, Luke's Jesus is first and foremost

compassionate, a friend to outcasts and marginalized. The prayer, as it is taught in Luke, can be viewed within the further teaching context of compassionate justice. It paints a picture of a world in which all people have bread enough for this day and the next, in which God's name is made sacred each time undeserved forgiveness is given and received, in which God's kingdom is embodied in equality and justice for all. These values—essential to the kingdom of God being realized on earth—are apparent throughout this section of scripture in which Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem and all that it will mean while also keeping his vision focused on teaching his disciples along the way.

*The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* notes that in Luke, "Like various other themes, the emphasis on prayer as a facet of Jesus' character that is modeled for the disciples culminates in the passion narrative. [In Luke] Jesus prays on the Mount of Olives before he is arrested. [In Luke] He instructs the disciples to 'pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' Then, he kneels and prays for deliverance from the suffering he knows lies ahead...Later, [as written in Luke] when Jesus is dying, he dies praying, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing;' and 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' ...If following Jesus in Luke means doing as Jesus does, then prayer is a vital part of being a follower of Jesus."

The least well-known of our readings today is a version of the Lord's Prayer excerpted from *The Didache*, a late first-century, early second-century compilation of the teachings of Jesus which circulated widely but was omitted from the canon of scripture. This collection of teachings contained practical and pastoral advice for Christians who were trying to adapt the new faith for the eclectic Gentile world in which they lived. The Greek word itself by which the collection is known—*Didache*—translates as "Teachings." Obviously, this particular prayer was considered central enough to the teaching and learning of the Christian faith at the end of the first century that it was included in this important collection. The prayer in *The Didache* follows

a similar format as we have seen in Matthew and Luke, showing that the essence of the prayer was mostly intact as it circulated from classroom to classroom, and was repeated from believer to believer. The version in *The Didache* adds the doxology, "For thine is the power and the glory forever..." Believers were further instructed to pray this prayer three times each day. As educators, steeped in modern modes of learning, we know that repetition is one of the most effective—and it is encouraged by *The Didache*. Story is another effective way of learning—and it is modeled by the presentation of the prayer in Luke's gospel. And experiential education—one of the most effective ways of ensuring students will remember the lesson—finds its voice in Matthew's urging the early Christians to put their faith into practice by praying the prayer with regularity. Clearly, one main context for our understanding the Lord's Prayer is to see it as an early teaching tool—a tool that, when used frequently and with intention, continues to teach us.

While it is the case that this beloved prayer was widely used as a late-first-century teaching tool to teach and learn the essence of the faith proclaimed by Jesus who was no longer with them, it is also true that the prayer has retained its significance because it was born out of the love of Jesus for all of his disciples and friends. Why pray? Because of the love that connects us with the Divine. Why pray for others? Because it brings us more fully into our calling as the loving and compassionate body of Christ on earth. Why pray for God's kingdom to come and forgiveness to occur and Divine guidance to lead us each day? Because these are some of the fruits of living a life of love; these are some of the fruits of our faith put into action. So the second context for the Lord's Prayer is simply love.

I am indebted for the illumination of this truth to our own, dearly loved, Dorothy Landeros. For those of you who may not have known her, Dorothy was a founding member of this congregation, not only in name, but most assuredly in spirit. Hers was a spirit that welcomed each person with joy. She greeted people with an interest in what they were doing. She remembered names and families and events with remarkable humor and retained her

interest in others literally until the day she died. Why? Because Dorothy loved. Yet her love was no sappy, sentimentalized caricature. Dorothy perfected her love with her own brand of elegance and her sparkling sense of humor, laced with her passion for justice.

In her delightful way, Dorothy used to tease me about trying to get out of preaching whenever I could—by planning special days like Celtic Sunday or the youth Christmas pageant or the NOLA work trip report or the reports of the Mexico mission trips. Dorothy would seek me out during the fellowship time after worship on those days, and with a wink and a smile, would say something along the lines of “Well, you got out of preaching again, didn’t you?!” I never took it seriously because I knew her heart was as passionate as mine about including the congregation in mission trips and expanding our worship experiences with special day events. But in the off-chance that Dorothy was disappointed in not hearing more sermons, I dedicate this one to her, with gratitude for her keen listening skills; gratitude for her insightful observations of the journey of faith shared in countless Bible studies and informal conversations; and gratitude for her indomitable spirit of joy that lit up our church for these past 35 years.

On Tuesday morning of this week, just a few hours after Dorothy’s passing, I was sitting curled up in a ball on our sofa, weeping for the loss her passing represents in this congregation. All of a sudden, with the clarity of a brand new thought, I recalled having had to memorize scripture for rewards as a child. Of course, I chose the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus wept.” This past Tuesday morning, that verse zoomed into my tear-stained field of vision, and in the next instant, I was recalling the story that prompted that two-word pathos. Jesus had arrived at the tomb of his dear friend Lazarus. Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, were there, and despairing that, if only Jesus had arrived earlier, perhaps their brother would have lived. Before talking theology, the author of the gospel gives us a glimpse of just how deeply Jesus could love another. “Jesus wept...” And if we missed the significance of those two

words, more words follow: “See how much he loved him...” the author has the surrounding crowd remark, in that kind of sacred whisper that accompanies death. “See how much he loved him...”

So also today, dear ones, so also as we grieve, so also as we seek to pray more deeply. Our sister in faith, through her loving of us, has shown us yet another context for the Lord’s Prayer. We pray this prayer because we are called to love—we are called to love God enough to call God “hallowed.” We are called to love our neighbor enough to care about their food and nutrition and well-being. We pray this prayer because we are called to love the world enough to cease serving the Caesars in whatever form they present themselves, and, in love, to serve God and God’s loving purposes only. In the praying of this prayer, we are called to love ourselves enough to let go of old hurts and proudly-clutched wrongs done to us, and, in love, to forgive those debts so that God can use that same open conduit now rerouted to soften our own breaking hearts.

There is much truth in this prayer being a prayer of justice and a prayer of compassion, a teaching tool to instill the values of Christ within the emerging Christian community in the first century even as it is an equally-effective teacher for us Christians in our day. This prayer is also, perhaps predominantly so, a prayer prayed from out of the filled-to-overflowing cauldron of love graciously given to each of us at our birth.

This week, as I was grieving with gratitude—that is, grateful beyond words for the gift Dorothy was and will continue to be within this congregation, yet saddened that we will no longer see her in that familiar green robe or hear her chuckle or enjoy her overpowering us at Scrabble—the constellation of feelings swirled for me, as it did for you. In the midst of it all, came an email message from The Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. You may recall that they are our mentors in the covenant process; from them our congregation borrowed that unique way of doing church with a higher level of commitment. Their current ministry includes

a daily email that offers spiritual guidance on the journey. This one, entitled "Mindful," written by Mary Oliver, poetically weaves together the themes presented today...themes that seek to be taught each time we pray the Lord's Prayer. Ms. Oliver writes,

"Every day

I see or hear

something

that more or less

kills me

with delight,

that leaves me

like a needle

in the haystack

of light.

It was what I was born for—

to look, to listen,

to lose myself

inside this soft world—

to instruct myself

over and over

in joy

and acclamation.

Nor am I talking

about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,

the very extravagant—

but of the ordinary,  
the common, the very drab,  
the daily presentations.  
Oh, good scholar,  
I say to myself,  
how can you help  
but grow wise  
with such teachings  
as these—  
the untrimmable light  
of the world,  
the ocean's shine,  
the prayers that are made  
out of grass?"

I trust that as we pray our prayers and the prayer, we will do so with a delightful intention to keep teaching and learning the faith, and with a growing commitment to continue putting that faith in action through love.

~ Amen and Blessed Be ~