Reflections on the Lord's Prayer

“You feel a need to pray because God wants to enter into your life with God’s creative and life-giving presence…”

words of The Rev. Canon Grant Carey, from his publication, “Stump the Canon”, Vol. 2

In today’s gospel, we are given the gift of the Lord’s prayer or, as we like to say, the prayer that Jesus taught us. This beloved prayer appears twice in the New Testament: once in Matthew (6:9-13), where it is part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and once in Luke (11:2-4).

Before the prayer was committed to writing, there were many versions of the Lord’s Prayer that were kept in use through oral tradition. Even after the prayer was set in Greek text, its translation into Latin and other languages assured that prayer variations continued. As the church grew and evolved, prisms of cultural and denominational difference added to the diversity of its wording. Yet, in spite of any and all word variations, this prayer provides a powerful and accessible bond among Christians.

Saying the Lord’s prayer, in addition to being an act of devotion and faith, can also be a touchstone of loving connection, a thread that holds together the strands and fabric of our lives.

For me, the first thread took hold during my childhood in Michigan. From earliest memory, my mother and I knelt at my bedside and said the Lord’s Prayer every night. Since then, the Lord’s Prayer has served as a “go to” prayer—a prayer that can be said in a great variety of circumstances and situations. It is a prayer can open our hearts to unscripted prayer; and it is a prayer that can wrap all prayers and thoughts into itself in closing.

The Lord’s Prayer has the power to live within us at a very deep level. Once, while training to be a chaplain, I was called to the bedside of a comatose man who was dying with no family beside him. As I said the words of the Lord’s Prayer, his lips moved ever so slightly, and there was a small flicker of energy under his eyelids.

Although the prayer is attributed to Jesus, its wording and format are resonant with prayers in the Jewish tradition of Jesus’ time known as the Eighteen Benedictions. The version of the prayer that is most familiar to us is the one from Matthew. In Luke, the prayer that Jesus teaches us is short and spare. Its economy of words makes room for us to consider its meaning in fresh ways.

Every prayer is an encounter with God and how we pray reveals something about how we see God. The words we use, and the content of our prayers are like viewing platforms that give us insight into our relationship with God and our understanding of God’s action in our lives.
Today’s gospel begins and ends with naming and talking about God as “Father.” I want to acknowledge up front that this gendered language can be difficult for those who suffered problematic parenting, or other trauma, related to male father figures. Speaking of God as “Father” is intended to convey a sense of familial belonging, loving generosity, and deep connection, not only for Jesus but for the disciples he was teaching and for us all.

It’s worth paying attention to how we address God in prayer and what is comfortable for us. Whether we bid our prayers with terms of love, awe, closeness, or formality can be self-revealing with respect to our relationship and our belief. In the New Zealand prayer book, there is a version of the Lord’s Prayer that covers nearly all possibilities. It begins: “Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life Giver, Source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all, Loving God in whom is heaven…”

Praying Luke’s version of the Lord’s prayer is an adventure—one that I invite you to try at home as I have done this past week. The quick succession and immediacy of the petitions is fresh and thought-provoking. “Your kingdom come,” standing alone and without embellishment, compels us to wonder how it might be brought closer and what role we might play. The three petitions that follow speak to basic human needs for sustenance, forgiveness and protection with unadorned directness.

Petitioning prayer can be risky business. What we ask for, and how we respond when a prayer is not answered as we hoped, or envisioned, has caused more than a few people to walk away from their faith and from God.

We dance with that issue in the mini parable that Jesus shares with his disciples immediately after teaching them to pray. A man knocks on his neighbor’s door at midnight to ask for food, so that he might feed an unexpected guest. His need is urgent; hospitality to travelers was a sacred duty in the time of Jesus. But the sleepy neighbor refuses to disturb his household and help.

Jesus continues his teaching by saying, “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence” (or in some translations, shamelessness in asking) “he will get up and give him whatever he needs.”

If ever there was an ambiguous and confusing statement, this may be it. How we interpret this verse sheds light on whether we view the power of prayer to be driven by our own actions and attitudes, or by God’s goodness.

Is Jesus saying that the petitioner’s needs will be met because of his—the petitioner’s—persistence? And, if so, is it his persistence in asking, or his persistence in trusting that the sleeper will eventually help?

Or, is Jesus saying that it is the sleeper’s persistence and determination to be a source of help that is the pivotal point?
We are left to decide for ourselves.

Theologically, it is unthinkable that prayer would only work if we wheedle and hound God for what we need, heaping plea upon plea. I believe God is more attentive to us than that.

But “keeping our eyes on the prize”, keeping our attention on the needs for which we pray also matters. It makes sense that the petitioner’s persistence in trusting the sleeper to eventually respond keeps their relationship active, and opens the petitioner to receiving and recognizing the sleeper’s help when it finally comes.

And it seems powerfully true, too, that the God who is faithfully present with us, even when we turn away, the God who longs for the coming of God’s kingdom and our participation in it, is the one whose faithful persistence in loving us helps us in our times of need.

The coming of God’s kingdom will need the prayers and efforts of all of us. Jesus bids and exhorts us to ask, search and knock so that we may receive, find, and move through the doors that open for us. And even though this invitation rings with generosity, graciousness, and love, much of our asking, much of our searching, and many of the doors upon which we knock will be rife with challenge and pain as well as fulfillment and joy.

Jesus tells us that everyone who asks will receive, everyone who searches will find, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

To secure his promise, Jesus reminds us of our own desire to give good gifts to those we love, and then lifts that standard heavenward so that we know God’s desire to give is even greater than our own. In Matthew, Jesus concludes by saying, “If you who are evil know how to give good gifts, how much more the heavenly Father will give good gifts to those who ask him.” But in Luke, the promise is far better. Instead of promising good gifts, Jesus says, “…how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

This two word difference changes everything. We call the Holy Spirit by many names and all of them are helpful: advocate, comforter, sustainer, and guide, to name but a few.

There is comfort in trusting that the Spirit is present with us, helping us to pray with Jesus that God’s kingdom come.

I’d like to conclude with a few lines that The Rev Anne Marie Witchger wrote in an online sermon that places prayer within the context of activism for social and political change that aligns with justice and mercy in God’s kingdom.
“Jesus wanted our prayers to lead us to difficult places; to challenge us to do uncomfortable things in his service, to give hope. If you’re tired of hearing people offer their thoughts and prayers in the face of devastating situations because it doesn’t seem like enough, then it’s time for us to change how we think about prayer. It’s time for us to reclaim what it means to pray the way Jesus taught us. It’s time to be shameless—to keep asking for God’s presence in our lives and in the world, despite how daunting our challenges may seem. “

“And if we have moments when we feel like our prayers are weak, or like we don’t know what to say or do, we can be like the disciples: “Lord, teach us to pray,” they asked him. Jesus stands ready not only to answer our prayers, but also to show us the way.”

Amen