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Praying the Lord's Prayer

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Text: Luke 11:1-13 (C - Pentecost 8)

I still remember the first prayers of my childhood. One is the familiar, "Now I lay me down to sleep"...although I sometimes wonder how I ever went to sleep after saying, "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." That's pretty scary stuff! Maybe I memorized the words without really thinking about what they meant. Another prayer, precious to me, is a table grace that has passed through several generations on my father's side of the family:

Great God, the giver of all good,
Accept our praise and bless our food.
Grace, health, and strength to us afford,
Through Jesus Christ our blessed Lord. Amen.

I appreciate the gift of these prayers. They remind me that my parents valued prayer and wanted it to be part of my life as well. They also express my parents' conviction that God supplies our needs. Not always our *wants*, but always our *needs*. Needs like grace, health, and strength. Whenever I have occasion to recall these simple prayers, I feel connected to a loving, heavenly Parent even as I remember, with gratitude, the human parents who have guided and supported me. On this foundation my own prayer life has been built, although now it feels good that I can use my own words in conversation with God, as they come to me — sometimes speaking, sometimes listening — just as I do when I sit and chat with a good friend.

A Bible study book that I sometimes use is called *Gospel Parallels*. In it the major events in the life of Jesus as recorded by the first three Gospel writers are set down side by side so that they can be compared. To spend some time with this book is to discover that Luke places considerable emphasis on prayer — particularly the prayer life of Jesus.

For instance, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan river, that heaven opened and a voice spoke to him. Luke, however, is the only one who tells us Jesus heard the voice while he was praying. Luke is the only one who tells us that Jesus chose the disciples after spending the night in prayer. Matthew and Mark both tell us that Jesus had a conversation with the disciples on the topic of who people thought he was; only Luke tells us that it took place while Jesus was off in a lonely place with the disciples, praying. Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus took three disciples up the Mount of Transfiguration but only Luke mentions that the purpose of the trip was to pray. In Luke's Gospel, before they leave for the Mount of Olives, just prior to his arrest, Jesus says to Peter, "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail...." In the garden, say Matthew and Mark, Jesus tells the disciples to watch; according to Luke, Jesus tells them to pray. And the last words of Jesus, recorded for us by Luke, is the familiar prayer, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Luke also records for us three parables about prayer that the other Gospel writers ignore. The parable in today's text about the friend at midnight is one of those. He also tells us the parable of the widow and the unjust judge and the well-known parable of the Pharisee, who prays for show, and the publican who prays from his heart.

Well, in all of this, I believe that Luke wanted to make a very important point: that Jesus found prayer time vital to his relationship with God. Not incidental, but essential. And if we were to read the Book of Acts, also written by Luke, we would note that the early church was a community of God's people who were also often at prayer.

So, in today's text, the disciples find Jesus praying. They have found him in prayer before, and they are beginning to understand that prayer time is important to him. They want to share this grace and so they ask that he teach them to pray, too. In response, Jesus gives them the prayer which Christians the world over continue to pray to this day. It has been called a "model prayer." It expresses what Jesus believed about our relationship with God and with each other.

We note that the prayer does not begin with "your honour" or "almighty and eternal one" or "sovereign of the universe." There's no begging approach to a heavenly monarch. It begins with the word "father" — a translation into Greek from the Aramaic "abba" which really means "daddy." So "father" is not a formal title. It's a casual,

informal, affectionate word that a little child might use toward an indulgent father who is bouncing him or her on his knee. Adults in the time of Jesus used this term “abba” of their earthly fathers, but even then only in intimate conversations and only at very special times. So we can assume that those who heard Jesus refer to God as “abba” may have been quite shocked. Who did Jesus think he was, daring to call the Creator of all things “daddy”?

Well, indeed, Jesus may have been disclosing something of his own very special relationship with God. But I believe that he was also wanting us to know that God is One with whom we, too, can have an intimate, relaxed, and lovingly affectionate relationship. And if we are so lucky as to have — or have had — a good and loving human father (and mother) this becomes, for us, a very powerful picture and image of God.

But there is more. If we can be so lovingly affectionate with God, then we are justified in having the same trust in God that a child has in the father she calls “Dada” or the mother he calls “Mama.” Fortunately there are still many of us who have pleasant memories of the time when our mother and father were our whole world and we believed that nothing was impossible for them. They could take away every hurt and gratify every need. As adults we realize that our human parents are not all-knowing and all-powerful; they have limitations and imperfections. But adulthood, for the Christian, requires that we commit ourselves in trust to our heavenly Parent who does know everything and can do everything.

Therefore, says Jesus, you come to “Daddy” God (or “Mommy” God) and *you ask!* Which is something we know well how to do. Suitors ask for a date, politicians ask for votes, telemarketers ask for a few minutes of our time, ball players ask for time-outs, charities ask for donations, the sick ask for a cure, the wronged ask for justice, the accused asks for clemency, the victim asks for restitution. Yes, we know well how to ask!

So, the first petition: “*Hallowed be your name.*” This is the way to ask that we not bring dishonor to the One who gives and sustains our life. Rather, we should use God’s name with love and respect.

Then comes the petition, “*Your kingdom come.*” Well, what kind of kingdom is that? Certainly not one of absolute power wielded by a divine tyrant. Rather, the one which Jesus modeled — in which the least is the greatest, and service is the highest privilege. We pray for a restructuring of human relationships in which Jesus’ way of justice and

peace becomes the norm for our human community. And we ask that this future hope become our present task as we work to break down the walls which divide us.

And now, "*Give us each day our daily bread.*" That's an acknowledgment that we depend on God and on each other for our nourishment. God is the provider of food. But more than that. *All that we have and all that we need* is from God. So we pray that God continue to provide for us even as we exercise good stewardship in sharing what we have with others.

Next: "*Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.*" This prayer petition sounds like a contract. Forgive others and then you will be forgiven. But it is not a "tit for a tat." Rather, it is a gracious invitation for each of us to bask in the forgiveness of God and then to be as generous in forgiving others. As hard as forgiveness is — for God, and for us — we are called to reciprocity in reconciliation. So as we ask for ourselves we also extend our hands and our hugs to one another.

The fifth and final request in Luke's version of Jesus' prayer says, "*Do not bring us to the time of trial.*" In other words, "God, please don't put us where our weakness will betray us. Don't make us have to prove ourselves. Save us from that time when the tragedies of life are so great that we are tempted to deny your love, your presence, or your existence. We're not ready for the finals. We've got learning and growing yet to do."

Which brings us to Jesus' final teaching in the parable that follows the prayer. He tells the story of a friend who comes at midnight (in the days before all-night convenience stores) and asks for three loaves of bread. Asks? No! He demands. Insists. Persists. He's a nuisance. An embarrassment. A nag. The point isn't the outrageous request, but the imperative to ask and ask and ask. And we should know that. Our young children do it to us all the time. They refuse to take "no" for an answer. Often they ask until they wear us down and we give in.

So then, says Jesus, we come to "abba" God and we ask with insistence and persistence. And God gives us what is best for us. Perhaps not the thing we thought we *wanted*. But definitely what we *need*. And God's ultimate gift, says Jesus, is the Holy Spirit — God living in us and through us — the One who will strengthen, encourage, support and sustain us in this life and the next. It's the one gift we cannot do without.

That's why we come again today saying "*Lord, teach us to pray:*

'Abba, give us what we really need!'"