

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Tenth Sunday After Pentecost
24 July 2016

Scripture readings:

Hosea 1:2-10

Psalms 85

Colossians 2:6-19

Luke 11:1-13

I don't know how many years I've been here, but it's a longer time than I imagined. It feels longer to you than it does to me, I'm sure. *[laughter]* But one of the few changes I've made and one of the early changes that I'm responsible for in this parish is the use of the more traditional language in the Lord's Prayer. Now that's astounding coming from me who sees himself as "with it", contemporary and on top of things and all the rest of it, but there was a reason I did that. The reason is hospitality. I felt, and I still do, that if anyone walks in the door of the church who has not been affiliated with the church for years and years and years, one of the few things that everybody knows, one of the few treasures we have in common, is probably the Lord's Prayer, learned in the language that we learned it in, which isn't entirely King James. It is a contemporized version of older language. An interesting thing about the King James version - when that translation was done, the English they chose to use even then in the 17th century was already archaic. So there's something about church people using old-fashioned languages, whatever it is.

But the idea was to use that form of the Lord's Prayer mainly for my comfort because it's always about me *[laughter]* and the argument was for the guest, whoever he or she might be, who may have been separated from the tradition for a long time, to have that one piece of the liturgy with which she or he could identify, feel at home with, feel it hadn't been taken from him or her, changed, altered or otherwise be an unfamiliar expression of the prayer that Jesus was asked to teach his disciples in the gospel text for today. That's the reason. So it's probably worth our time since most of us do not sit around during the week and read catechisms. It's been a long time, hasn't it? But you know when you did your catechetical studies you had to study the Lord's Prayer and the explanations of the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments and The Apostles' Creed. The Episcopalians have something called the 39 Articles. Did you have to study those for confirmation? No. Were you ever instructed in the Table of Kindred and Affinities? Now that's an interesting sheet in the back of the old prayer books which tells you whom you may and may not marry. *[laughter]* It was an attempt, I believe, to prevent inbreeding. It's hysterical. You get things like a man may not marry his mother's cousin's wife's uncle's sister's brother. It gets more and more complicated as it goes. It's really quite fun.

But here we have in very straightforward simple language Jesus being asked and Jesus providing this prayer for his disciples. It seems strange to me that they ask Jesus to teach them a prayer the way John the Baptizer taught his disciples. *They have one. Why don't we have one? He did it that way. Why don't you do it this way?*

Well, apparently Jesus doesn't have a problem with prayer because when they ask him, he's been praying himself. But this prayer which we repeat so automatically and which was originally spoken in German...Oh no, it was Spanish! *[laughter]* This vernacular thing that we repeat and repeat and repeat. Sometimes when somebody is dying the only thing that is left to

say is the Lord's Prayer. Your vestry says the Lord's Prayer at the end of every meeting. We say it and it's hard when something is that familiar to really think about it. It's not really a very complicated prayer.

Jesus said, "*When you pray, this is what you might say: Father.*" That's far enough. He's suggesting that we in praying relate to the Almighty God as a parent. Now thank you to the women's movement, thank you to those who have brought to our attention the business of people abusing each other. Thank you in part to the Middle Ages of the Church that went off the deep end with the veneration of Mary. Thank you for the sensitivity that not everybody in the world has had a great father. Some of us have been luckier than others in that category. But to suggest that the only identification for God at this point in the Lord's Prayer is a male divinity is problematic. Let's admit that. But surely what Jesus is saying about God is that the God we address in this prayer is a loving parent.

Do you know anything about the Shakers? Their furniture, yes. They were a completely celibate community. They were profoundly committed to equality between the genders. Completely equal male and female sharing of the workload, etc., etc., etc. And they dared hundreds of years ago to use the Lord's Prayer saying *Our Father and Mother who art in heaven*. They saw value in the equality of genders and in understanding the generative nature of God as parental and not gender restricted.

So what I think Jesus is suggesting is addressing a loving parent. And if that's not clear enough, the appendage to the text that talks about if a child asks a parent for a fish, no good parent - father or mother - will give the child a snake. If the child asks for an egg, no good parent would give the child a scorpion. Even poor parents understand how to respond to the needs of children generally. What Jesus is encouraging us to believe is that in our relationship to God we're not only encouraged but expected to relate to God as a loving parent.

That may not be a radical idea to us who have grown up with that idea, but it was to some, and it was certainly to the religious people of Jesus' day who were in the constant business of appeasing an angry God who demanded that animals be slaughtered and burnt, that incense be offered, that dietary laws be restricted, that clothing be woven with the right fabric, that all the laws must be obeyed because God was angry, and if the laws were not obeyed then God punished people for not obeying the law.

I think if you consider the Ten Commandments as a simplistic form of the law, you realize that God doesn't have to punish anybody who breaks those laws. We end up punishing ourselves and getting into trouble with each other. God doesn't have to waste her time with that.

So there is a place for the law, but Jesus is suggesting that the generative force of the Creator God is love. In one simple word or two: *Our Father*. So Jesus is saying approach God as a loving parent and then ask for two things: *Give us this day our daily bread*. Sustain us in our bodies in our world in this place. *And forgive us our sins*. Now that's not astounding necessarily, but you're not going to hear people often say, "*I'm a sinner.*" In the world in which we live we say, "*We've got problems and it's their fault.*" "*We've got a difficulty and she did it.*" "*They came here and made our country a mess.*" We have trouble looking in the mirror and saying, "*I have an elemental problem.*" The church language is this: *I am by nature sinful and unclean and*

cannot save myself. In the problems we face in the world today, part of the problem is myself. Now if you're running for office, it's never yourself. It's always the other guy. Always! And politics in the nation is no different from politics in the Church and elsewhere. We have a very difficult time taking responsibility for our part of the difficulty.

So the two premises of the Lord's Prayer are: Sustain us in this life and help us, teach us, encourage us to be humble. Humble is not arrogant. Humble is not always right. Humble is educable. It takes a certain amount of humility to be a student. Humble is willing to run the risk of learning from someone who is different from myself. Humble is being willing to admit that I along with every other person in the world am a child of God and - now here's one of the great secrets of our nation - I see myself as an equal and no better than anybody else in the world. Now that doesn't work out for us very well politically, economically, socially, ecclesiastically. We always like to know who's up and who's down. We always like to know whose face to walk on, but I'm sure it's not mine. It's our human nature.

But Jesus, when asked to teach his disciples how to pray, says, *Sustain me, O God, and allow me to make a self-evaluation that keeps me humble and honest.* And Jesus suggests that, I believe, because Jesus believes in a God who loves, not an angry God. That's the kind of thing we can say to our God without fear of being destroyed. And if we believe God knows everything anyway - she's omniscient - the hypocrisy of trying to hide things from God is a waste of time anyway. *He who has looked at another lustfully has committed adultery.*

So here's this Lord's Prayer. It's a very simple document. And it goes on to say, *Forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.* Any takers? I don't fit in that category, but that sets a standard. So if you're going to pray, ask to be sustained, believe that God is a loving parent, admit your sin, be humble, and work at forgiving the debts of those who owe you something. Amen.

Now one of the insights I get out of the rest of this text is an interesting one, I believe. I have a suspicion that the guy who didn't get out of bed where he is sleeping with his children didn't get out later just to shut him up at the door. I have a feeling that the man who needed bread was smart enough to go to the next door and ask the next guy and go to the next door and ask the next guy. Because I wouldn't trust the loaf of bread given to me by somebody who was that aggravated. But the indication that Jesus is making is *be persistent in prayer.* Why? For this reason, because I don't think that God needs to be told a simple thing by us. God does not need to be informed of our needs. That's how we started today. Did you hear the collect for today? *You know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking.* What is it you can teach God about what you need? What is it God needs to hear from you that God doesn't know already? How do you expect to change God's behavior to improve it in terms of God's generosity and love to you and every other person in the world?

One of the things that fascinates me about the window above the altar, a picture of the night Jesus was betrayed - he prayed that the Church might be one. Well, the Church in that window is back in the corner asleep. They've all fallen asleep. The scripture reports that Jesus is alone. I want to know who heard the prayer if he was alone. I think this window and this text about the Lord's Prayer is a story about God's prayer to us. I think our prayers are inadequate and often misdirected. I wouldn't tell you not to say them. Say them and say them more than

ever, but I think we forget to believe that every day, in terms of creation, God is praying to us. And what is God praying to us? That the Church might be one, and at the end of the gospel you have a simple answer, and it's this: *If then you who are evil* - See, I can't say that to you. I can't stand up here and say you're evil, but I can read it. *[laughter]* You know how I feel about the forefinger, don't you? It's used and given to us to point and to point at problems, but only ever at the person and problems to whom it's attached. *If then you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!* Now that's what prayer is all about. To answer God's prayer, to open a space in our lives, in ourselves, in our hearts, in our beings, in our bodies for God's Holy Spirit to live in us. That's the one thing the whole Lord's Prayer is about - an invitation to the Holy Spirit to live in us so that what we do betrays God's presence in us. God never asks us to do that alone. In the epistle lesson today we read about who Jesus is as the head of the body, *and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.*

So the Lord's Prayer points us to the business of prayer, opens us to the possibility of listening to God's prayer and considering that God's request of us is simply to make space in our lives and our beings and our bodies for God to be present so that as God is present in us, God might be present in the world wherever we go and however we work together as the Body of Christ which is the Church.

So who's praying to whom? You may remember that at the beginning of the gospel lesson Jesus didn't say, *"I want to teach you how to pray."* His disciples came and said, *"Teach us to do what John the Baptist taught his disciples to do. They have it. We want it. If they can do it, we can do it."* But Jesus doesn't really teach them to pray that way. Jesus isn't instructing them to change God's mind. Jesus with his prayer is instructing them to run the risk of changing their own minds and allowing God to change their minds and hearts and allowing God to come and live with them. It's not done by anything we think, do or say. It's done by God. It's God's activity and God's Holy Spirit.

And so it is in the life of the Church. It will happen several times here today. People will come for anointing. Hands will be placed on them, the symbol of asking the Holy Spirit to be with that person in his or her illness, in his or her challenge, in his or her own situation. Over the font in baptism hands are extended so that God's Holy Spirit might be in the water that refreshes and cleans and gives new life. Over the head of every confirmand, the imposition of hands, God's Holy Spirit on these people who have studied the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, the catechism, the Table of Kindred and Affinities, and now don't have to go to church anymore. That's what confirmation is, isn't it? That was a joke! Come on, I got a better response to that at 8 o'clock! *[laughter]* In ordination, hands on the head of the candidate to be ordained - the Holy Spirit. And you will see in a minute hands over the bread and wine on the altar, asking God's Holy Spirit to be in, with and under bread and wine as that goes into us to live in us so that God's will might be done, not ours. *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name.*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.