



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JULY 24, 2016
THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

When You Pray . . . Psalm 138; Luke 11:1-13

Three friends--Joe, Bob and Dave--were hiking in a wilderness area when they came upon a wide, raging, violent river. They needed to get to the other side, but had no idea of how to do so.

Joe decided to pray. He walked to the edge of the river, bowed his head and prayed, "Please God, give me the strength to cross this river."

In an instant, God gave him big arms and strong legs, and he was able to swim across the river in about two hours, although he almost drowned a couple of times.

Seeing what happened, Dave walked to the edge of the river and prayed, "Please God, give me the strength *and* the tools to cross this river."

In an instant, God provided Dave with a rowboat and he was able to row across the river in about an hour, after almost capsizing the boat several times.

Bob saw what God had done for his friends, so he also walked to the edge of the river and prayed saying, "Please God, give me the strength *and* the tools *and* the intelligence, to cross this river."

In an instant, God turned Bob into a woman. She looked at the map, hiked upstream a couple of hundred yards, and walked across the bridge.

I think the disciples were wise when they went to Jesus and asked him to teach them how to pray. Understanding what we need to pray for is rather important.

Luke offers us a "bare-bones" version of "The Lord's Prayer" compared to the one included in Matthew's gospel. Week by week, we recite the prayer as Matthew presents it with a doxology added to the end. I like praying The Lord's Prayer when we worship, but I also think it is good to pay attention to the words recorded by Luke. He tells a story in which Jesus instructs us about prayer. Luke wanted us to think about our praying and to recognize prayer as a foundation of the life of faith. Like the three friends who were trying to cross the river, each of which offered the previous one's prayer plus what they discerned as an additional need, we will do well to broaden our prayers as we understand our needs and all that God makes available to us.

When we pray, it is important that we have a good understanding of who God is. I have mentioned to you before a particular scene from the movie, *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. It is dinner time and race car driver Ricky Bobby (played by Will Ferrell) is at the table surrounded by family and his best friend, ready for the feast. He begins to pray, "Dear Lord Baby Jesus, or as our brothers to the south call you, Jesús, we thank you so much for this bountiful harvest of Domino's, KFC, and the always delicious Taco Bell." He continues to offer thanks for his family and prays for Baby Jesus to use his Baby Jesus powers to help heal his father-in-law's leg when his wife suddenly interrupts and reminds him that Jesus grew up. "Well, I like the Christmas Jesus best and I'm saying grace," Ricky Bobby replies. "When you say grace, you can say it to grown up Jesus or teenage Jesus or bearded Jesus or whoever you want!"¹

Ricky Bobby reminds us how easy it is to relate to God in ways we prefer rather than to do our best to discover the fullness of God. We celebrate the birth of Jesus each year, but it is the Risen and Exalted Christ who is One with the Father and to whom we pray. Jesus was God in the flesh who lived our lives and understands the ins and outs of our lives. Jesus points us to God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. We love and adore a baby but the infant Jesus is not the One who taught us about life.

We have all heard the story of the little boy who came home from Sunday School and said to his mother, "I learned God's name today." "God actually has many names," his mother replied. "Which one did you learn?" "Harold!" said the little fellow proudly. Our teacher told us to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven, Harold be thy name."

¹*Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*, Adam McKay, Director, Sony Pictures, 2006.

To some folks, God might be known as Harold, but I think Jesus was pointing us to a relationship rather than a particular name. In intimate times of prayer, Jesus called on God as "Abba," the common word for "Daddy." Before we ever dip our toes in the river of prayer, we need to realize that God is present as a Daddy who will wade in the water with us. Knowing God's name is like knowing the password to God's heart. In the Semitic culture of the day, a person's name was an indicator of their personality and character. To hallow God's name means to honor and revere God and our relationship with God. Jesus suggested that we begin our prayer with an attitude of reverence, recognizing that we are speaking to the Creator of the universe, the Parent of all humanity, and the One in whose hands our soul rests. Our understanding of who God is shapes our relationship with God and determines how we approach God and how we expect God to respond to us.

According to Jesus, when we pray, we should ask that God's kingdom come. It sounds almost like God is waiting for us to hand him the key to the city so that he can roll in and take over.

Once again, Jesus prods us to go deeper than the words we read. Praying for God's kingdom is not a request for God to do something new; rather, it is a prayer that we will have the courage and strength to help make obvious what is already here.

Jesus taught that the kingdom of God is in our midst. Instead of a particular place or a designated administration, the kingdom of God is an attitude, a way of life, the spirit of the Gospel playing out all around us. From day one, the kingdom of God has been in place. The problem is that we often ignore it or deny it. We work against it because it requires that we live in a certain way. We must treat one another with kindness and respect. We take care of the poor and vulnerable in our midst. We seek peace and work against injustice. We continually pay attention to the way we live.

The kingdom of God becomes evident when we gather to worship with other believers. The kingdom of God becomes obvious when tragedy strikes and we rush to help without thought for our own welfare. The kingdom of God becomes obvious when all children are protected, when everyone is treated with dignity, when we work together to solve problems rather than fight for our own selfish interests. The kingdom of God becomes evident when we become the answer the prayers of others or our own prayers. To pray that God's kingdom will come is to commit ourselves to living as Christ lived. To pray that God's kingdom will come is to sing with our life that old favorite Baptist hymn by B.B. McKinney:

While passing thro' this world of sin, and others your life shall view,
Be clean and pure without, within; let others see Jesus in you.

. . . .

Then live for Christ both day and night, be faithful, be brave and true,
and lead the lost to life and Christ. Let others see Jesus in you.²

A life of prayer is a life in which God in Christ becomes evident to the world.

Jesus also reminds us that when we pray, we must be mindful of what we need. The truth is that most of our praying is about the things that we need or want, but once again, Jesus puts a twist on his teaching. He does not suggest that we pray, "God give us all that we want." No, Jesus knew his scripture and his people better than that. He also knew God and what God wants for us, so he urged us to pray, "Give us each day our daily bread." A strict translation actually indicates that we pray for "bread for tomorrow," suggesting that we have a sufficiency for today and we ask for what we will need for tomorrow, no more, no less.

Those words immediately bring to mind the Hebrew people wandering in the desert. They complained about God taking them away from the good food they had in Egypt to become nomads in a desert wasteland. God reminded them that he had given them freedom which would nourish their spirits and answered their prayers by providing them with manna and quail. Each morning they could pick up what they needed for the day, no more, no less. No one would go hungry, but if anyone got greedy, their food would spoil. It was an exercise in trust that God would continue to meet their needs day by day.

Prayer is an exercise in trust. We do not live in a culture which relies on just enough to get us by. We gather more than we need, we stockpile what we have. We do not trust. Trusting God with our daily needs is a radical departure from the way we live today. It requires complete confidence in God to provide what we need today and tomorrow and the many days after that. Furthermore, this trust is found not only in the provisions we have for life, but also in the ways in which we relate to one another. If we would deal with one another honestly and directly today, we could avoid many problems that might occur tomorrow.

²B.B. McKinney, "Let Others See Jesus in You," © Copyright 1924. Renewed 1952 Broadman Press (SESAC).

To that end, Jesus realized that two things operate full bore in our lives: our own need for forgiveness and the need to forgive one another. Unforgiven sin is a hindrance to relationships and can keep us at arm's length from one another and God. When we are aware of and honest about our own shortcomings, when we recognize and turn from our own sin, we have a much stronger sense of our self and an openness to God. When we have a healthier attitude about ourselves, we can more honestly and directly relate to one another. Recognizing our own need for forgiveness and our dependence upon God's grace enables us to extend those same gifts to other people who wrong us.

Jesus understood the power of guilt and anger to bind us inside of ourselves. Over and over he called forth the good in people. He named their sin, he urged repentance, and he offered forgiveness. He also reminded them that the gifts we receive from God are to be shared with one another. Praying for forgiveness can bring about a radical change in how we feel about ourselves and how we relate to one another.

Each time I pray the Lord's Prayer, I am aware of how odd the last request is: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Could God ever lead us into temptation? Does God play with us, teasing and tempting us to see how faithful we are? I don't think so. The language of Jesus' day would have expressed his concern in these words: "Do not bring us to the time of trial." In other words, Jesus urges us to avoid evil, to stay away from situations that will tempt and test us. It is a call to a life of righteousness, of right living. Jesus taught his disciples that the final movement in prayer is a movement away from evil. One of our greatest needs is to distance ourselves from sin and to remain close to God.

Once again, this life has to do not only with our personal morality, but with our relationships with other people as well. "Help keep us on the right path, O God, and keep us from straying into places where we have no business going" is the way Jesus wants us to live.

Ultimately, prayer is not about asking and receiving, about wanting and getting, it is about a particular way of living. Like the three friends at the edge of the river, we are on a journey, seeking a way to get to a special destination. Prayer is the means by which we travel. Prayer is the way we live. When we pray, we ask God for the strength, the tools, and the intelligence to walk the right pathway of life. Prayer is not magic, but God will answer and will provide. We have a map and Christ is the bridge that carries us to the life of faith. When you pray . . . expect to live. Amen.

July 24, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Even as we gather in your name to worship and call on your name in prayer, Holy God, we confess that sometimes we are more like those demanding signs and testing you rather than people of faith who ask and seek and knock with open and humble hearts. But still you promise that you will be with us and that you will provide for us like a loving parent who offers good gifts to your children. We come now with hearts ready to be filled and transformed by the gift of your Holy Spirit.

We are humbled, O God, that you call us into relationship with you, inviting us into a conversation of faith and responding to our needs. We are grateful for the gift of prayer: for prayers of praise and thanksgiving in moments of pure joy, for prayers of confession when we allow ourselves to admit our need for your grace, for prayers of supplication in times of need, for a whispered question or cry of despair when we have nowhere else to turn, for every circumstance which brings your name to our lips and your abiding presence to our awareness. O God, we know that we can bring to you the deepest longings of our hearts with the assurance that you hear and respond when your children call.

We are grateful, too, Loving God, that we can pray for the sake of others. We pray for healing for those who are sick, for comfort for those who mourn, for compassion for those who suffer, for peace for those who endure violence. May our prayers change not only their circumstance but also transform our hearts. May our prayers uttered on behalf of others move us to respond to their needs with generosity and to accept them with openness. May our prayers draw us closer together as a community of faith, seeking to discern your will and to answer your call.

On this day, we also pray for our young people who will be on pilgrimage in the coming week. Grant us safety as we travel and open hearts and minds as we encounter new people and ideas. Prepare us to have our own faith in Christ deepened and strengthened, even as we learn to appreciate and respect the faith experiences of others. Help us to encounter you in ancient forms for worship and prayer so that we might be open to seeing and hearing you in new ways. We thank you for the generosity of a congregation which understands that faith can only grow when it is allowed to stretch and change, and which believes that investing in the lives of young people is an investment in the building of your kingdom.

Hear our prayers today and every day, Gracious God, for we offer them in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus the Christ, and by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

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