“Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”
_A meditation by the Rev. Brian D. Ellison_
_The Third Sunday in Lent, March 7, 2010_

**Texts:** Matthew 6:25-34; Exodus 16:1-16

The Lord’s Prayer unites disciples in every time and place. But it is still strange to imagine all of them praying this part of this prayer together: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

…The billionaire at his banqueting table, successful in business and able literally to order any bread from any place in the world delivered to his door the next morning by private jet if he so desired.

…The working family who has plenty of bread but no time to eat it together.

…The single mother who comes by the SPEAC food pantry downstairs just before it closes, hoping no one sees her, feeling embarrassment about needing to take home a loaf of day-old bread to provide for her children.

…The 13-year-old Haitian boy who now is the head of his household with a younger brother and a few square feet of grass in what once was a park to call kitchen, pantry and dining room table.

It is strange to imagine all of them praying these same words Jesus taught us, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Strange to think we join our voices with all these when we pray it ourselves. But that is what we do. We all need bread, of one kind or another. We’re all hungry sometimes. We’re all hungry for something.

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Time for a short lesson in understanding ancient Greek literature.

I actually don’t like to do this, and you’ll agree that I don’t usually inflict it on you. You don’t have to be an expert for God to speak to you in the scriptures. And of course, I’m certainly not an expert. I’ve taken a few classes, and have a few books. The Bible isn’t rocket science—it’s God’s Word written by and for humans in a variety of styles at a variety of times. It speaks to us and we do our best to hear it.

But one of the things that we all should know about it is that it’s old—really old. And it’s written in languages, ancient Hebrew and _koine_ Greek and a little bit of Aramaic, that no one really speaks any more. There are some similarities with modern versions of those languages, but languages change a lot over time—think of trying to read a newspaper written in English but with the vocabulary of Beowulf, or the style of Chaucer. To make sense of the Old and New Testaments requires research. Usually, we figure out what words mean in the Bible by what they mean in other places in the Bible. If we know what it’s saying in one place, that helps us understand it in another place. Sometimes we reach outside the Bible to other writings from the same period for help with translations.

And then there are those times when even the experts have to admit they aren’t really such experts. Like when a word shows up in the Bible that you just can’t find anywhere else. Then, you have to do a little bit of thinking, a little bit of detective work. Then, you have to guess.

Give us this day our daily bread. Give us this day our _epiousios_ bread.
Epiousios can’t be found anywhere else in the Bible. Just here and in Luke, in this line of the Lord’s Prayer. Go beyond the Bible: In ancient Christian writings it is found several times—but only discussing this line of the Lord’s prayer. Outside of religious texts it is found exactly once: part of the word, written on a piece of papyrus from the fifth century, in a list of supplies or an expense report: chick-peas, straw, other materials and at the end an expenditure of one-half of one obol for epiousi… That’s it. That’s all the help we get from the word itself. Give us this day our epiousios bread.

Scholars, wisely I think, have wisely concluded that the word does not mean “sourdough” or “pumpernickel.” But taking the word apart and reading how those before us tried to make sense of it, we come to the conclusion that it spoke of something to be provided daily. And not only this but that it speaks of something that would be needed, necessary on a daily basis. And finally, there seems to be some implication that the word refers to a future day, which is to say the next day—tomorrow. It’s a guess, and the word is easily enough rendered as “our daily bread.” But a fuller way to say it might just be, “Give us today, the bread that we need for tomorrow.”

That may feel like a lot of talking to get to that, but let’s consider for a moment what it might mean that Jesus wants all of us, whenever we pray, to say “Give us today, the bread that we need for tomorrow.”

It would be hard, saying such a thing, for Jesus’ first disciples not to think of the Exodus story they all knew and that we just heard. They would remember the story of their ancestors wandering in the wilderness, utterly dependent on God to provide each night their bread that they needed for tomorrow. It was always enough—exactly enough. And the story of the exodus is the story of God’s people’s freedom. They find life and identity and purpose because God provides their daily bread.

Bread was the stuff of life. And Jesus was right when he said in another place that one “does not live by bread alone.” It’s the stuff of life that Jesus invites the disciples to pray for, to ask today for the stuff they need tomorrow. We all are hungry for something, and we surely will be hungry for it tomorrow. What this lesson in prayer offers for our hunger is permission to ask for it. Even to expect it. Jesus affirms the longing of our stomachs and, by extension, of our hearts.

Everyone is hungry for something. And Jesus inviting us to pray “Give us today the bread we need for tomorrow,” reframes our lives not as earning or striving, but as trusting and waiting. God will provide the single mom with what is needful and that becomes a source of praise, not embarrassment. God will provide the working family the love to sustain one another even in overfull and stressful lives. God will even touch the heart of the billionaire who lacks for nothing but still is empty. In praying instead of making, in anticipating instead of cultivating, we find ourselves filled.

But before the disciples can start turning their attention to what’s on the horizon, Jesus had one more thing to say about thinking about tomorrow.

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‘Do not worry, saying ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ … Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.’
Jesus is still speaking to the disciples in the same place, according to Matthew’s gospel. And having just told them to think about what their needs may be for tomorrow, now it seems at first, he’s telling them to knock it off.

When Jesus takes this unusual turn, when he goes all “Proverbs” on us and starts rattling off wisdom for daily living, some people will no doubt tune out. Do not worry about your life—“easy for him to say,” you can almost hear in the background. “Today’s trouble is enough for today”—don’t I know it! Because these sayings are short and lovely, some might not take them very seriously. They’re little thoughts for the day, with the emphasis on little, and if they help you fine but let’s move on to the real stuff.

But taken together with the prayer, the instruction to ask God for the bread we need for tomorrow, don’t these words become more than that? After all, Jesus isn’t telling people here not to think about their future needs, not to plan for them, not to anticipate them. He is telling us not to worry. But he isn’t telling us in a “there, there, everything will be just fine” sort of way. He only tells us not to worry after he has already told us to pray.

And here is where it finally makes sense for the starving orphan to pray this prayer alongside the billionaire, the stressed-out parents alongside the stressed-out teenager, the mourning family alongside the happy newlyweds. Whatever bread we have, and whatever bread we are praying for, praying as Jesus taught compels us to a certain way of thinking about who we are, and what we have, and what we need.

We come, all of us, as those who never know for certain what tomorrow brings, but who must never be consumed by it.

We come, all of us, as those who have every reason to believe—whether looking at our ancestors in the wilderness, or the lilies of the field—that God takes care of us.

We come, all of us, as those who no matter how powerful we are, are powerless to obtain for ourselves the things we most need, and who in humility find sustenance and faith and hope for tomorrow.

When we trust God today for our epiousios, our bread for tomorrow, we find that our hunger is already being satisfied, our literal and spiritual stomachs’ rumbling growing silent, our hearts’ longings being sated, our desires being transformed to match the plentiful manna God is sending. Let us make this our prayer. And satisfied, let us live in grateful praise. Amen.