

Needs

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
at Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan
March 2 & 3, 2020*

Scripture

Matthew 6:7-15

Sermon

Jesus is our teacher. And when it comes to prayer, he has some simple instructions. He says, "God knows what you need. So don't pile up words asking for every little thing. Instead, pray like this . . ." That's how he introduces the Lord's Prayer.

+

Do you remember the first time you first heard the Lord's Prayer? My first time was in 1973, on the radio. Sister Janet Mead had a small hit with a rock 'n roll version of the prayer. It started off with drums and bass, and with a Moog synthesizer. Then Sister Janet sang, and her voice was as clear as a bell: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hal- lowèd be thy name . . ." It was beautiful. I've never forgotten the melody.

AS PRAYERS GO, THE LORD'S PRAYER IS PRETTY SIMPLE. In just fifty words or so, it expresses our deepest needs. It starts with our most profound need. That's our need to live in a world where God's will has been accomplished, a world where God's kingdom has been established, a world where heaven and earth have come together to the glory of God. In that world, there will be no more death or crying or pain. In that world, there will be worship, peace, beauty, healing. In that world, we will finally be home. That's our first need. And that's our first prayer.

But we're still waiting for that world. And while we wait, we're still living in this world. And here we have other needs. When we say the Lord's Prayer, we put those other needs before God.

FIRST, THERE'S THE MOST BASIC NEED OF ALL, THE NEED FOR FOOD. You see, it's true that we don't live on bread alone. But we do live on bread, on food. We need food. Enough food. Enough food to get us through. So we pray, "Give us the food we need for today."

For most of us, that's an easy prayer to say. Because we're not worried about having enough food for today or even for tomorrow. But sometimes and in some places, it be-

comes a desperate prayer. When crops have failed, when livestock is gone, when the lake is dried up, then "Give us the food we need for today" is a cry of faith in the midst of despair. Sometimes it's a final cry.

+

All creatures depend on God for their food, for their life. That includes us. So we pray, "Give us the food we need for today." Or we should. Because food is never something to take for granted. And when we do eat, we give thanks to God.

THERE'S ALSO THE NEED FOR PROTECTION. Evil times overtake us now and then. And evil forces are always against us. So we pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

"Temptation" here is not about being tricked into sinning. No, it's about hard times. Hard times can push us to the limit. Hard times can test the depth of our discipleship. Hard times can reveal the quality of our faithfulness.

+

Jesus sees hard times ahead for his fellow Jews. They will go to war against Rome. And they will lose. Jerusalem will fall. The Temple will be destroyed. Crosses will line the highways. And people will be tempted to do just about anything to survive. It will be the Book of Lamentations all over again.

+

When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," we're asking God to protect us from hard times. Because we don't want to fall away. We don't want to be pressured into falling away from Jesus. So we pray, "God, please protect us from that."

THERE'S MORE TO THE NEED FOR PROTECTION. Besides the evil of hard times, there is also the evil of spiritual forces. These spiritual forces want nothing more than to drive a wedge between God and God's people. So we pray, "Deliver us from the evil one."

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul urges the Christian community to be ready for a fight. He says, "Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:10-12).

+

If you remember the introduction to the Book of Job, then you know how the devil has a perverse sense of mission. He wants to destroy the connection between God and God's people. And he will stop at nothing. Only God will stop him. Only God will restrain him. So we pray, "Deliver us from the evil one." We need protection.

NOW WE COME TO THE LAST OF THE NEEDS IN THE LORD'S PRAYER. It's the need for forgiveness. And this one is a two-way street. It's "Forgive us as we forgive." This one is so important, so central, that Jesus picks it up once more as soon as he finishes teaching the Prayer to his disciples. It's so central that Jesus repeats the theme again and again throughout the Gospels. And when I say it's central, I mean it's central in both directions, "Forgive us as we forgive."

+

Now, in case you haven't noticed, let me point it out to you. The Lord's Prayer is plural, not singular. It's our Father, not my Father. It's the food we need, not the food I need. It's deliver us, not deliver me. And it's forgive us as we forgive, not forgive me as I forgive.

The Lord's Prayer is not a private, personal prayer. The Lord's Prayer is the church's prayer. And the needs expressed in the prayer are the vital needs of the church as a faith community.

BEING CHURCH IS ALL ABOUT THE LIFE WE HAVE TOGETHER IN CHRIST. And at the heart of that life together is forgiveness. Among us, forgiveness comes first.

There is, of course, the forgiveness we receive from God. That forgiveness is ours through Jesus Christ. That forgiveness is ours because God is merciful. That forgiveness binds us to our heavenly Father. That forgiveness sets us free from the power of sin, sets us free to live a new life together.

And at the heart of the new life we have together is the forgiveness we give and receive from one another. That's the default setting in the church. Forgiveness is what we do, because forgiveness has made us who we are.

+

When Alessandro Serenelli attempted to rape 11-year old Maria Goretti at knife point, she resisted. He stabbed her fourteen times. Maria died the next day, but not before she forgave her attacker. She said she hoped to see him in heaven.

During his time in prison, Serenelli repented of his sin and sought forgiveness from God. After he was released from prison, he sought forgiveness from Maria's mother. She did forgive him. And the next day they received Holy Communion side by side.

+

In the church, forgiveness is what we do, because forgiveness has made us who we are.

BUT THE CHURCH IS STILL LEARNING THE WAYS OF FORGIVENESS. Our practice is not yet perfect. For one thing, forgiveness can be really hard sometimes, hard to give and even hard to receive.

But in the church—and this is why the plural, the “we,” the “us,” of the Lord’s Prayer is so important—in the church, the point is not that every individual has forgiven everyone for everything. And the point point is not that every individual has been forgiven by everyone for everything. The point is that the church taken all together is a community that practices the grace of forgiveness, practices as best we can.

So we don’t reject members who are struggling to forgive or struggling to be forgiven. No, we love them, we embrace them. Because we are committed to growing together with them in the grace of forgiveness.

+

That’s what the Lord calls us to do. That’s who the Lord calls us to be. And we pray for that all the time, as he taught us.

+

Glory and thanks be to God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

+