

Thoughts + Prayers
Luke 11.1-13
Pentecost +10C
July 24, 2016
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St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

The Text

Lord, teach us to pray. This is the point in the service at which we pause to hold silence, to focus our attention and intentions on the same words and same direction, to name what burdens our minds and lifts our hearts. Today, let's consider the text before us, a collection of Jesus' teachings, as we move into that space of prayer.

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, 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!'

- May God bless the reading and the hearing of this word.

The Teachings

Lord, teach us to pray. For many years now, the journey of my inner life has one of cultivating silence. I identify with what the Buddhists' call the monkey mind. Writer B.J. Gallagher explains, "Buddha described the human mind as being filled with drunken monkeys, jumping around, screeching, chattering, carrying on endlessly. We all have monkey minds, Buddha said, with dozens of monkeys all clamoring for attention. Fear is an especially loud monkey, sounding the alarm incessantly, pointing out all the things we should be wary of and everything that could go wrong."¹ For this reason, teachers across generations and religious traditions have taught practices that quiet the mind, slow the body's breath, and draw the attention to one, centering thought.

Hindu and Buddhist traditions encourage choosing a mantra to redirect awareness to the present moment. Franciscan Father Richard Rohr, of the renowned Center for Action and Contemplation, teaches forms of centering prayer and breath prayer with the belief that "remaining silently and openly in God's presence, 'rewires' our brains to think non-dually with compassion, kindness, and a lack of attachment to the ego's preferences."² Stillness and silence, Rohr teaches, are the first steps toward peacemaking, justice seeking, abundant living. Before anything else, we must learn to pray.

This way is not easy for me. I have always had words. Words and words and words, all day long. As a lively undergraduate, I frequently had a hard time making it to classes on time or at all because I would run into friends along the walk or sitting around the quad and get swept away in conversation. As I have gotten older, become a mother, grown into myself, I deeply feel more need for silence. I need time alone. I need stillness. But calming that monkey mind and sitting openly in the presence of the Divine is a practice I am cultivating and have surely not yet mastered.

The First Prayer

Catholic poet and writer Michele Szekely offers this prayer on becoming still before God:

This moment is for You.
I consent to Your action
In my mind and in my heart

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bj-gallagher/buddha-how-to-tame-your-m_b_945793.html

² <https://cac.org/about-cac/contemplation/>

In my will and in my soul.
I welcome Your action!

And to prepare myself, to make room for You,
I will sit here, quietly, with my eyes closed,
In an attitude of peaceful rest and loving devotion,
My intent is to welcome You.
I will slow down my thoughts and my imagination,
I will calm down my fears and my emotions,
I will try to exercise patience and humility
And I offer you these feeble efforts...

I lift up my soul to You,
Whispering in my heart and in my mind,
"Here I am! Quiet but attentive to You"

The Teachings

Lord, teach us to pray. Meda Stamper writes, "The point of prayer is not to change God's mind but to shape ours, to make us fit for the kingdom, ready to live the only life possible in God's household: one of love."³ Jesus has prayed with the disciples, in front of the disciples, near the disciples. He is modeling for them the methods of prayer, the persistence of prayer, and they are watching to see how his practice shapes his life. Jesus says prayer is like knocking on a friend's door in the middle of the night and persistently waking them up. What a funny scene! The door is locked, the kids are in bed, it's too late to drop by for a visit, go away. But you keep knocking and knocking until finally the exhausted friend helps you out and goes back to sleep.

I don't think this means that our prayers will be answered as we wish as long as we are persistent in asking. I think this means our prayers change us by first requiring our focus, intention, and life efforts "to bring about what is asked for in the prayer."⁴ Fred Craddock notes of Jesus' teaching, "[He] treats prayer as a learned experience, not simply as a release of feelings. Discipline is clearly implied."⁵

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2918

⁴ a phrase by Ronald Rolheiser on prayer from *The Holy Longing*

⁵ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, p. 153

The phrase “our thoughts and prayers are with you” are prompting cynicism lately because they are perceived as passive platitudes. With grief and heaviness, “thoughts and prayers” are now linked to violence and tragedy on a local, regional, national, and global scale. Our thoughts and prayers are with Syria. With Munich. With Kabul. We hear elected officials and community leaders offer “thoughts and prayers” and we are skeptical. What are your thoughts and prayers going to do to curb gun violence? To end drone strikes? To stop terrorism? How can your casual, glib thoughts and prayers do anything to change our world at all?

But practiced sincerely and persistently, our thoughts and prayers are part of our peacemaking action. Our thoughts and prayers are a powerful starting place by creating the world that we want with our words. Not just the spoken words of prayer in here, but the thoughts and prayers we carry with us all the time. The intentions and motivations of our hearts, the conversations we have with stranger and neighbor. We’re unleashing a particular kind of world with the thoughts and prayers we send out, and we get to choose what kind of world that is going to be. Prayer invites us to ask a series of questions: What is the context for the world we want to create? What is the lens through which we want to see the world that we know? Karoline Lewis notes, “these words from Jesus today...help us remember a context we should never forget when it comes to making meaning in our lives -- the context of God.”⁶ Our thoughts and prayers frame the context of our lives.

Are our thoughts and words framing the kind of world a politician, foaming at the mouth and yelling at the crowd, tells us we should fear? Do our thoughts and prayers show us the kind of world God dreams up for us all—with banquet tables and feasts, doors thrown open and invitations for all who will come, words of peace and “do not fear” abounding? In our prayers, are we asking for our own personal security and comfort? Are we praying for the stuff of our earth to reflect the stuff of God’s ways? What are we working toward with our lives? How are our thoughts and prayers contributing to the world God desires for us all? Karl Barth said, “To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”⁷

If we aren’t giving our thoughts and prayers to the stuff of God, then we ask, “Lord, teach me to pray.”

The Second Prayer

⁶ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=4690>

⁷ Richard Foster, *Prayer*, p. 243

South African writer Alan Paton offered prayers for the work of reconciliation and peacemaking that his home needed:

O Lord, open my eyes
that I may see the need of others,
open my ears that I may hear their cries,
open my heart so that they need not be without succor.
Let me not be afraid to defend the weak
because of the anger of the strong,
nor afraid to defend the poor
because of the anger of the rich.
Show me where love and hope and faith are needed,
and use me to bring them to these places.
Open my eyes and ears that I may, this coming day,
be able to do some work of peace for thee.

Give us courage, O Lord, to stand up and be counted, to stand up for others who cannot stand up for themselves. To stand up for ourselves when it is needful to do so. Let us fear nothing more than we fear thee. Let us love nothing more than we love thee, for then we shall fear nothing also. Let us have no other God before thee, whether nation or party or state or church. Let us seek no other peace but the peace which is thine, and make us its instruments, opening our eyes and our ears and our hearts, so that we should know always what work of peace we should do for thee.⁸

The Teachings

The grit and endurance Jesus describes is what brings us to worship today. The belief that we are gathering our lives together for something big. The hope that our silence and words and closeness to one another will start some kind of vibration that carries out into the world. The rumble in our guts that tells us we can give our lives to “on earth as it is in heaven” kind of love and service if we do it together. Sometimes we wonder if we’re a little naive in asking for these things. We wonder if we are misguided and can’t actually be heard by God or might not actually be equipped for reshaping this world to reflect the kingdom of God. Are we foolish in our efforts?

Methodist pastor Katie Savage encourages us in our timidity through Jesus’ words, “And he even tells us that it’s OK to appear a little ridiculous in our prayers. We can

⁸ Alan Paton, *Instrument of thy Peace*

come in the middle of the night, begging for loaves of bread. We can come, as the Greek word *anaideia* suggests, 'shamelessly.' We need not worry if we've gotten the theological questions wrong, or if what we're petitioning God for is even the right thing to ask. We can come, still, as little children, who can't quite put sentences together, who are feeling big feelings that we can't quite make sense of, and who just want what we want and we don't know what to do about it. God won't punish us for asking, he won't give us snakes or scorpions. Instead, we can trust that God is listening, that God will not be too far off to hear our prayers, even if they are silly or selfish or completely off-base. He is, indeed, Our Father. And, as Frederick Buechner writes, 'even if he does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all of our prayers that is what we are really praying for.'" She adds, "the Hebrew word for Amen means 'right on,' or 'so be it.' What is usually translated in the Gospels as, 'Truly, I say to you' is Jesus saying 'Amen, I say to you.' So maybe we should repeat that last word in Lord's Prayer a few times, whenever we finish praying it, so as to call attention to this very, very good stuff."⁹

We gather ourselves to be a particular kind of people in this world. We gather ourselves to receive God's love and peace and comfort and then to live it out in a way that releases God's love and peace and comfort into the world. We gather to pray for what might seem absolutely ridiculous and against all odds. We gather to lament the myriad tragedies of this week, this Summer, and of our lives. We add Munich and Syria and Kabul to our list of summer violence. Once again, the thoughts and prayers go out. Our thoughts and prayers are with the innocents. Our thoughts and prayers are with those who suffer. Our thoughts and prayers are with those who lead and fail to lead and want to lead. Our thoughts and prayers are with our neighbors. Our thoughts and prayers are with friends awaiting tests, those lost in isolation and loneliness, and our thoughts and prayers circle back to ourselves. Shamelessly, we persist before God as we pray together.

The Prayers of the People

O God,

Make us your people.

Wandering, distracted, scared, hopeful, restless, itching, centered, true.

We come to this place with our best selves and false selves
our best intentions and our deepest fears.

We exhale before you and open ourselves to your presence.

⁹ <http://www.aplainaccount.org/#!Luke-11113/bhul0/578cee580cf26df1ae59b7f3>

In stillness and in silence, may everything untrue slip away as we are drawn to your Holy Center in this moment.

Again, we grieve violence. Images are seared in our minds of the pain caused by hate and fear in our world. God, be in those places. God, move into the fear. God, overcome the hate. When we are tempted to play that game, when we are tempted to believe that our lives and decisions should be ruled by self-preservation and crippling anxiety, overcome us, too.

In our prayer, draw us back to your imagination. Draw us back to the beginning when everything created was so good. Draw us back to the breath you Spirited into each one of us that we might see your image in our neighbor, in the stranger, in the other across the aisle. Draw us back to the context of your love, that we might live on your Way.

We give ourselves to this Way today. We give ourselves to your path of love and grace and kindness and patience and gentleness. May our thoughts and our prayers and our lives be shaped by the movement of your Holy Breath. We pray these things with boldness in the name of the one who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy Name.
Thy Kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth,
As it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, The power, and the glory, Forever.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.