

Proper 12
Luke 1:1-11

As Cristy and I were in the midst of all the royal baby excitement in London, I wondered what kind of event in our country – indeed in the world – would cause hundreds of thousands of people to come together in pure joy. Anticipatory joy before Baby Cambridge’s arrival, deep and rousing joy at the event itself, and a resurgence of joy at the publication of Prince George’s name. Of course the royalty and monarchy has its detractors, but during the two days of the actual event it was if everyone in London stopped what they were doing to come together to celebrate. No separations by political party or by favorite sports teams or by long held grudges or by economic level or by social issues or even by religion. It seemed like everyone was celebrating. In fact I felt pretty sad about the cynics and anti-monarchists who couldn’t or wouldn’t feel this level of national joy.

There was a deep hope that was born along with the royal baby; an assurance that England would continue into the next century with its traditions and history and rituals and music as a people over a thousand years old. As we think about the communion of saints or as individuals we try to see how far back we can go in our family ancestry, all Brits have this identity with those who came before them – a communion of Brits, I supposed we could call them. That grounding in a foundation that is part of our essence can be so very important to our identity as individuals and groups. Even those of us who were only visitors could connect at some level with experiencing the joy and connection that surrounded us. There was something about the traditions and history and rituals and music that was absolutely contagious.

I thought a lot about how we as Christian communities might experience such a depth of joy and common connection. I wondered how many different ways a preacher can tell a congregation – can reassure a congregation – that God deeply loves each one of them ... no matter what. How many different ways can a preacher reassure a congregation that Jesus is there for them to lean on and that the Holy Spirit is within them, providing guidance and grounding. How many times and in how many ways can we say that so that the message begins to be internalized by the listeners in ways that change lives? And how many times will it take for that message of present and unconditional love and guidance to cause a change of life in individuals?

So let me make a couple of simple statements before moving into the meat of the sermon: God loves us. Jesus loves us. God and Jesus love us so much that they have given us the non-ending guidance and presence of the Holy Spirit in our souls. We are never alone.

Without any embellishment and in the midst of our doubts and inability to see or feel that presence, that’s just the way it is. Like it or not, that’s it. We are loved and never alone. As the apostle Paul has written, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

So how can we maintain that level of assurance and confidence of God’s love and presence in a way that has sustained millions of Christians like us over two millennia? What commonality do we have with those who have gone before us and with those in our community today that bring us together as one in a firm and grounded connection?

Much like the Brits, we have so many common tradition and history and rituals and music that continue to remind us who we are as followers of and believers in Jesus Christ that our identities are strengthened and renewed in obvious ways and in not so obvious ways.

The reading in today's Gospel gives us a prime example of something that is ritualistic, traditional, historical, and even musical that brings us into our Christian identity, that comforts us through life, and that even takes us out of this life.

If you were to attend our pre-school chapel services on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings, you would experience the ritual and you would hear children from 2-1/2 to 5 years old praying the Lord's Prayer in unison. Most likely they don't know what it actually means, but the words and rhythms of the prayer are being inscribed in their souls. For as long as they live, they will have that prayer with them, regardless of the religious tradition or lack of religious tradition in their families, and regardless of the spiritual and religious choices they will make through adulthood. When they attend any kind of Christian ceremony through their lives – even those that might totally foreign in so many ways to their experience – once the Lord's Prayer is begun, they will mumble it along with the entire gathering, reminding them of the connection with a community that is greater and longer lived than any community in their lives. What a gift they have been given.

When we as clergy are present with a dying person and with their family, the Lord's Prayer is the one thing that brings everyone together, transcending even the family drama that might exist. Suddenly they are together in their words and focus and need for comfort. And more often than not, the person who is dying may even mouth the words or show some of recognition of what is being prayed. The Lord's Prayer is that deeply ingrained in our souls. And at the subsequent funerals, we see those who don't really participate in any of the rest of the service – they sit and stand stoically or emotionless – suddenly move their mouths when the Lord's Prayer is said by everyone.

It's certainly seems like an easy prayer. The two times Jesus teaches it are in Matthew, during his Sermon on the Mount when he talks about prayer in general, and then again in Luke, when his disciples ask him to teach them how to pray. Now in Luke, he knows they know how to pray because they've prayer with John the Baptizer when they were his followers. But now they're in a different place with Jesus and they want to know how he prays to his abba and they want to be in sync with that.

So he gives them the words that eventually become what we know as the Lord's Prayer. The version in Luke is a little shorter and a little different than that in Matthew. And both versions were expanded as the growing church to them and codified them into a common prayer for all Christians. Only recently – in the past 50 years – has a revised version of the Lord's Prayer been published. A version, by the way, that is much closer to the way Christ taught it than the version we have all been saying for many, many centuries. On a side note, when we have used the so-called newer version of the Lord's Prayer, that biggest cry of protest comes from our younger people and children. They want to return to the REAL Lord's Prayer. And we have, even though we've tried this a few times in the past 10+ years. So we will stick with the traditional form – at least as long as the current rector leads St Clement's.

But this brings us to the larger issue of how we communicate with God anyway. Many of us will say we don't know how to pray or we'll at least think it so our prayer with God doesn't happen the way we think it should. We wonder how other Christians can pray out loud so easily and extemporaneously but we can't. I will tell you that one of my assigned objectives during my clinical pastoral internship at the University of Rochester Medical Center was to learn to pray comfortably and extemporaneously with individual patients. I will work on that for the rest of my life. And for those of you who remember Sister Act with Whoopie Goldberg as Sister Mary Patrick, fake nun, you might remember the prayer she gave when asked to say grace before a meal in the convent:

Bless us. O Lord. For these Thy gifts which we're about to receive. And. Yea. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of no food, I will fear no hunger. We want you to give us this day our daily bread ... and to the republic for which it stands, and by the power invested in me, I pronounce us ready to eat. Amen.

And all the rest of the nuns said Amen and Amen.

The prayer that we've been given is our prayer – as individuals and as a community – to God. We can use it when we don't know what to pray or how to ask or how to give thanks or how to do any of the other kinds of prayers that our catechism lists in the prayer book. Saying the Lord's Prayer in the morning and at bedtime; saying the Lord's Prayer when you don't know what else to do in a difficult situation is communicating with God. Even if it's not specific to the needs you might have at a particular time, it says to God, "I know you're with me and you know what I need in my heart and please help me see the light in this day and in this situation." Be intentional about praying and block out distractions for at least the two or three minutes that it takes to focus on saying the Lord's Prayer. Give yourself those important minutes to turn toward the one who is always with you.

If you don't know what to pray, pray the prayer that Jesus gave us. The prayer that has been ours for 2000 years. The prayer that has been prayed by millions of our spiritual ancestors in the communion of saints. It is ours; it is inscribed on our souls; it brings us comfort, connection, identity, and, if only for a few minutes, it transcends all divisions and drama that we have with one another.

Just as the Brits have so much tradition and history and ritual and music to get them through times of common joy and common sorrow and good times and difficult times, so do we Christians. The essence of our faith becomes alive as we take those words of the Lord's Prayer as our own and pray them to abba/amma just as Jesus did. It's through something as simple as the Lord's Prayer that we are reminded of God's presence and love through times of joy and thanksgiving and of God's comfort and love through times of need. Thanks be to God for that incredible gift.

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