

Rev. Jerry Deck
Matthew 6:5 – 13

January 25, 2015

Roots
How to Pray

I have a friend from college named Alex. He's kind of a big, hairy, lumbering guy. Several years ago he decided to become a fitness trainer and so he studied and did what he needed to in order to become certified as a trainer. There was just one last step which was a test. So early one Saturday morning he showed up at the place to take the test and was joined that day by a number of other hopeful candidates. He noticed there were quite a few more women than men, but he didn't think much of it. The test was passed out and as he began to answer the questions he thought it was a bit strange that they weren't exactly what he had studied for. Yes, they were about fitness, but they seemed to be asking a lot of questions about aerobics.

He kind of shook that off, but as everyone finished the test the teacher told them that for the second part of the test they each had about 15 minutes to come up with a 5 minute aerobic routine that they would then need to perform by themselves in front of everyone. It was now clear that Alex was at the aerobics exam not the personal trainer exam. But by this point everyone around Alex, except Alex, had already gotten shed their outer clothes, revealing their spandex underneath, and started thinking through their routine. Meanwhile, Alex sat there with a look of absolute horror on his face. Now, to his credit, my lumbering, hairy friend, in his baggy clothes did put together an aerobics routine and (according to him) came just a few points shy of actually passing the exam.

I love reflecting on that story because it always makes me laugh. To think about his stunned face of horror as the leader told them what they were going to have to do. To think about how he had wondered whether anyone would notice if he slowly, smoothly walked out of the door and never came back. To think about how much he wished he could disappear and act like nothing had ever happened. And I think about it this morning because I get a sense that the disciples at the time Jesus gave them the Lord's prayer, may have been feeling very much like Alex on that day.

The disciples, as you may recall, have just been called by Jesus and quickly leave their nets and boats to follow Jesus. We used Mark to describe that, but Matthew says the same things. And right after this calling (in chapter 5) is when Jesus begins his famous Sermon on the Mount. In other words, Jesus calls them as disciples, they follow quickly, and then Jesus begins to explain to them what it means that they followed him, what that would entail, what it meant to be a disciple. And so Jesus begins with the beatitudes which say things like, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit" and "blessed are the meek" and "blessed are those who endure persecution." Then he goes on to talk about how not only is murder wrong, but if you are angry at someone that judgment awaits you. That rather than returning an eye for an eye you should simply turn the other cheek and if someone asks you for your tunic you should give them your cloak as well

and if you're forced to go one mile then you should go two. And then to top it off Jesus says, "You've heard it said love your neighbor, but I say love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

And all through this, I see these newly minted eager disciples staring up at Jesus and at one another and thinking, "Um, is this the wrong class?" I signed up for the "Ride with the messiah to victory over the Romans" class, not the "Let the Romans Slap You" class. How many of them began to wonder whether or not they could slip out the proverbial door without anyone noticing? Because, they had to realize that even if they wanted to, who could do something like this?! Who would have that ability?

And perhaps this is why, right at this moment, smack dab in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, perhaps right as Simon or Andrew is slowly moving back out of the crowd of disciples, Jesus brings up the subject of prayer. Right when they're thinking, "I'm in the wrong place" or "I can't do this" Jesus begins to shape a prayer for them. A prayer that, by its very nature, reveals a dependency not on ourselves to do these things, but on God. And so as we look at the Lord's Prayer, it's important that we see this in context in which it's placed. As a group of people gathered and trying to figure out what it means to be disciples. In other words it isn't just a nice "spiritual" prayer floating up to the skies, but is a prayer with teeth and consequences. A prayer that reflects our dependency on God, but also one that calls us to something on earth. In other words, it is a vertical and horizontal prayer.

We see this in the beginning line, I believe. "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." It's been pointed out that one of the things this first line does is help shape our understanding of God. First, that he is our father, which gives it a sense of intimacy. In other places Jesus will call God, Abba, which means daddy. As someone who loves coming home to his kids and having them run into his arms and screaming "Daddy" I can tell you it's a remarkable expression of love, joy and intimacy. But, of course, it also says that God's in heaven, in other words there's something that is also "other" about God. In other words, this God is not on our level, he is, well, God. And so we have what theologians call the immanent (father) as well as the transcendent (a God who is completely different than us).

But Jesus is also in these words showing us something else in these words. The horizontal part of the prayer, if you will. Which is that in saying, "Our Father" as Dale Bruner points out, Jesus is helping us to see that we are now adopted into God's family. Which means, of course, that we are brothers and sisters. Jesus points this out later in his ministry as well, but it's significant that at the very beginning he is articulating the importance of our seeing one another in this way. Because it changes how we perceive each other how treat one another. When I was growing up in the Pentecostal Church it was usually the practice that you would call one another brother so-and-so or sister so-and-so. So after my uncle would preach I'd hear someone say, "Great job, brother Deck." "Thank you, sister Shirley." And well, to be honest it always felt a bit hokey to me and so I never wanted to do that.

And yet, you may now notice that in almost every sermon I will end up at some point saying, “brothers and sisters in Christ” and that’s because I’ve begun to see that there’s actually great power and significance in seeing one another as brothers and sisters. It isn’t, of course, that brothers and sisters never have problems or disagree; goodness knows that over my life I’ve had more fights with my sister than anyone else. But it does mean that despite those disagreements there’s something deeper about our relationships. We have a shared history, a shared mission, a shared Father. And the truth is that no matter how often my sister and I fought there was never thought of walking away. Okay, maybe once or twice, but never did I do it!) The point is that what Jesus will make explicit later in his ministry, he is already beginning to imply now in this simple prayer. God is your father, and you disciples are now brothers and sisters.

Moving on in our prayer Jesus says, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Now this touches a bit on what we talked about last week in terms of God’s kingdom. But as I said then, sometimes we are guilty of thinking about God’s kingdom and simply thinking about heaven or about something that is far off in the future. It’s this vertical distinction, if you will. But in Jesus’ prayer we see that it is a prayer that desires to see heaven (the vertical) and earth (the horizontal), intersect (on earth AS it is in heaven). That the way things are in God’s kingdom in heaven will become the way things are here on earth. Now I don’t have time to go into a conversation on eschatology, or the end times, and on how I think that we have allowed Christian pop-culture, more than scripture to frame our understanding of these things, but I will say that I think we need to take the Lord’s prayer seriously and that when Jesus says, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” that he’s not just telling us to simply wish that this could be, but to pray it, to work towards it, to hope for it.

What that means I believe is that as we pray for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven we are also looking for opportunities for heaven and earth to intersect. We don’t oftentimes look at it like that, but whenever we follow the Sermon on the Mount, it seems to me, we are seeing heaven and earth intersect. So that, when we are being hospitable or don’t return evil for evil or choose humility over pride or care for one another as brother and sister we see points of intersection between heaven and earth, we see the Lord’s Prayer coming alive in our midst. It is yet one more sign of how this prayer embraces the vertical and the horizontal (our relationship with God and one another).

After this Jesus goes on to say, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Vertically this part of the prayer is a great reminder to us of our absolute dependence upon God. It is God who provides for us. We have talked about this a great amount, about the importance of our acknowledging our dependence on God. How that changes how we see everything that we have and are as a gift. So, this part of the prayer is both a request to God and a statement of gratitude about what God gives to us.

But it has been pointed out that if we really reflect on this prayer, and don’t just rattle off the words that when we say, “Give us this day our daily bread” we won’t be able to

help but remember that there are those for whom daily bread is not a given. As one commentator put it, this prayer makes us grateful but also puts a thorn in the flesh of its comfortable parishioners. "Give us this daily bread" and help us to provide bread for those who do not have it on this day.

Jesus then turns to our sins. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. This is the part of the sermon that gives us the greatest pause. Literally. Because, of course it's the one where some people say debts others say trespasses. I mean the best way to discover whether we have visitors is not to have them check a box, but to have us say the Lord's Prayer together. It gets them almost every time. Of course, it should give us pause for more than just this reason.

It should give us pause because in so many ways this is where we begin as disciples. We begin with the acknowledgement that all is not right with our lives and our world. There's an assumption here that we will make mistakes, we will fall short and there is an equal assumption that if we ask forgiveness, if we do not try and hide our weaknesses, that we serve a God who will forgive. In fact, one of the hallmarks of our faith is that it is one of forgiveness, cleaning away our guilt and shame. It is a forgiveness that, quite honestly, angered many in Jesus' time as he seemed to offer forgiveness for those whom others did not want to forgive. And yet here in the very beginning he is making it clear that it is at the root of who God is.

And here in the Lord's Prayer the move from the vertical component into the horizontal flows easily. That as a people who are forgiven freely we must then be a people who freely forgive. In fact one might say that the more you understand the forgiveness of God, the more you believe it and experience it, the more easily you are able to forgive others. In my own personal life I have seen family members who seem so quick to judge, so ready to hold grudge and at its root, it seems to me, is an inability for them to really believe and accept the forgiveness, the grace of Jesus. If we believe, truly believe, that God forgives us, I am convinced that out of that will flow an abundance of forgiveness. For what we do not deserve should be passed on to others whether it is deserved or not.

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." Jesus closes this brief prayer by directing us toward the future, toward what is to come. As Jesus sat there looking at the disciples, knowing what lay ahead of them, and as he looks ahead at us, knowing what lays ahead of us, he assures us that God is with us. That though times will not always be easy, that God will not allow evil to overcome. As Jesus knows all too well, that though there may be times when it appears that God is not in control, that ultimately God and his kingdom will deliver us, will prevail. The disciples would cling to this in the days ahead. When the Pharisees turn on Jesus, when the Romans nail Jesus to the cross and when the grave seems to have said the last word, surely they held on to those final words, deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, while the Lord's Prayer is surely simple and probably rolls off our tongue as easily as any passage in scripture, for those who take the time to not say the words, but to live them, it has the ability to stretch us far beyond polite words that we say on Sunday. In this brief prayer Jesus not only teaches us how to pray, but also shows the two commands that he will later say are the greatest: To love God and to love our neighbor. If we allow it, I believe it has the power to shape our dependence on God and to change us as disciples, as a church, as a community and as a world. Yes Lord, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Hallelujah. Amen.