

“Ask”

Sunday, July 25, 2010

by Glenn Woertz

Luke 11:1-13

Once Jesus was in a certain place praying. As he finished, one of his disciples came to him and said, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” Jesus said, “This is how you should pray:

Father, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon. Give us each day the food we need and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
And don’t let us yield to temptation.”

Then, teaching them more about prayer, he used this story: “Suppose you went to a friend’s house at midnight, wanting to borrow three loaves of bread. You say to him, ‘A friend of mine has just arrived for a visit, and I have nothing for him to eat.’ And suppose he calls out from his bedroom, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is locked for the night, and my family and I are all in bed. I can’t help you.’ But I tell you this—though he won’t do it for friendship’s sake, if you keep knocking long enough, he will get up and give you whatever you need because of your shameless persistence.

“And so I tell you, keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

“You fathers—if your children ask for a fish, do you give them a snake instead? Or if they ask for an egg, do you give them a scorpion? Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.”

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The preacher was deep in meditation, and having an unusually close and frank conversation with God. “Is there anything you want to ask me today?” inquired the Lord.

“Yes,” responded the preacher, “as you know, we down here often have trouble with time—how to manage it, how to measure it, and so forth. Lord, does time mean anything to you?”

“My son,” the Lord replied patiently, “you know I live in eternity, so time as you know it does not exist in my kingdom. However, to give you some perspective, let me tell you that to me, a second might be more than one of your centuries; a minute, as 10,000 years to you; a year to me longer than the existence of your world up to now. Do you begin to understand?”

Preacher bowed his head and said humbly, “Yes, Lord.”

“Is there anything else on your heart today, my son?” God asked.

The preacher trembled a little, and said meekly, “Lord God, it seems so unworthy to ask you about something as trivial as this. . .”

“Speak. Did my Son not say to you, ‘Ask, and it will be given to you?’” God prompted.

Preacher squirmed a little and stammered, “Well, Lord God, it’s not me, really, it’s the Board of Trustees. You see, things have been really tight for us financially, and we’ve had to cut back on many of our ministries, times being so hard. So could you. . . could you arrange for us to come into, say about \$950,000?”

After the briefest of silences, God replied, “Of course, my son. Just wait a minute.”

Today’s Gospel presents us with our dearly beloved Lord’s Prayer, probably the best-known prayer in our Christian world, if not the whole world, then goes on to give us instruction which is, the closer we look, more and more challenging to us as practicing Christians.

Most of us have known the Lord’s Prayer since early childhood, having learned it almost before we could really understand the words. Some of us can sing it, as we often do here, and some can sing it in two or three versions. It is so important to us that we seldom participate in a service or major ritual which does not include it.

Some years ago, I was in a church which had a change of pastors, and the new man did what many “new guys” do to grab the attention of his new congregation—he completely overhauled the order of Sunday worship, which hadn’t changed significantly for quite a few years. It was a fairly drastic change, taking us from a comfortably familiar format to a very formal “high-church” sort of order, almost as if he was expecting the Monsignor to show up any Sunday. This was a little jarring to many in the congregation, especially the more senior members, since it was a Protestant church. After a few weeks of this, the Lord’s Prayer vanished from the order of worship. I was approached by several members of the congregation (believe me, it was not a peaceful time to be Lay Leader), who were very upset by this. They loved their Lord’s Prayer and found the service a little empty without it.

When I told the pastor in private how these parishioners felt, his response (and I think he learned tact and circumspection at the Bill O’Reilly School of Comportment) was, “That’s only because they don’t know what they’re doing when they say the Lord’s Prayer.” What he meant to say, and might have said had he established a more direct connection between his mouth and his brain, was that the new order of worship, like those followed in many churches, spoke, through its structure, exactly what the Lord’s Prayer says. His service began with adoration of God and voiced our hope for the establishment of his kingdom on earth. It asked him to take care of us. It asked him to forgive us, to help us forgive others, and to help us abandon our sinful ways. But the people were not getting to say the Lord’s Prayer, and they felt incomplete and unfulfilled in the service. The new pastor wisely restored the Prayer, and his service then went about twelve minutes overtime instead of eleven. But the congregation was happy. After all,

this was how Jesus taught us to pray. Depending upon whether you get your Lord's Prayer from Matthew or Luke, He said, "Pray then in this way," or "When you pray, say:"

When I began reading about this passage and preparing for this sermon, it became harder than I had anticipated. Part of my difficulty is that prayer as described in this passage is something I do far less often than I know I should. Of course there are exceptional times, as I shared with you a few weeks ago, which usually arise out of need. I recognize prayer's value, most followers of Jesus would agree on that. I just have a lot of questions, perhaps like some of you? Here are some culled from a preacher in South Korea named Jackie Bolen:

- (1) Do people actually pray these days? It seems many of my friends don't, and I don't often meet people (outside of this building) who give evidence that prayer is central to their lives.
- (2) Of the people who pray, does it actually make a difference in their lives? Why do people who say they pray look the same as those who don't in terms of the outward reality of their lives?
- (3) Doesn't God know what this world needs much better than we do, even before we ask Him?
- (4) Isn't the outward reality of our actions in the world much more important than the inward reality of things like prayer and contemplation? Like feeding the hungry, pursuing justice and equality for all and peace? Am I just too impatient and want to see instant results?
- (5) And the great debate. . .Calvin vs. Arminius. John Calvin said that God will do whatever he wishes, whether we pray or not and prayer basically just orients us to God's will. So why waste our time, I guess? But then Jacob Arminius said that God's actions towards us are determined by our praying. And there's evidence of both of these positions within the Bible. It just all seems too confusing.

With all this in mind, let's look at just two parts of today's reading, the request or petition "Give us this day our daily bread," and the promise, "Ask, and it will be given to you."

Now, about this bread. The symbolic value of bread in Jesus' day was powerful. It was the staple of the people's diet. If you had no bread, you were probably starving, because you lacked the most basic food. The most basic physical need. When Jesus instructed his disciples to ask God for their daily bread, he was inviting them to pray for their daily needs.

As Matthew Stoll writes,

"A theme in the Bible is God providing. In the OT, we read of God delivering the people of Israel from slavery to the Egyptians, and he guided them to the desert. God first provided them freedom from their captors. However they found themselves in a harsh desert environment, no food, no water. And so they asked God for food (okay, it was more like they whined and complained), but nevertheless God provided. Every morning came the dew and as the dew evaporated it left a flaky white substance called manna (which means, what is it?), they called it

the bread from heaven. If that weren't enough, in the evening God also provided quail which fell from the sky (Ex. 16). While God provided only enough for that days food supply (with the exception of the day before the Sabbath when he would provide a double portion), he provided for them, every day, one day at a time, for forty years. Be careful what you ask for though because they had to eat the manna every day for the next 40 years.

“In the NT Jesus provided by turning water into wine at a wedding, he fed over 5000 people with two fish and five loaves of bread. He healed those who were blind, deaf, paralyzed, demon possessed, Jesus provided for the needs of many because God's character is giving.”

Of course, our needs go beyond just a need for daily food, and bread becomes a symbol for everything necessary for life or well-being, such as food, shelter, health, income or support, clothing, relationships, and more.

What Jesus is saying is that it's *okay* to pray for our own needs, however selfish we may feel in doing so. He compares us, in caring for each other and our children, to God caring for us. And if we do so much for each other, how could we expect God in his greatness and love for us to do less? Where we can get tripped up, though, is in being able to differentiate what is our *need* from what we just want or desire. And in not remembering what our part might be or should be.

A favorite story of many I've collected from my rabbinical friends is the one about the aging rabbi who is feeling tired and asks God, “*God*, don't you ever get tired of hearing the same ancient prayers from us, over and over, every *shabbos*, every holiday, high and not so high, the same thing. Don't you ever get *tired* of our praying?”

To which God replies, “No, my son, because I know how much you need to do it.”

In the latter part of today's Gospel, Jesus says “Ask, and it shall be given to you.” This leads to the basis of some pretty rudimentary Sunday school lessons, in which we hope to teach or learn some discrimination in what we ask God for. This goes back to wants and needs.

Richard Bolles, who wrote the hugely successful self-help and career guidance book, [What Color is Your Parachute?](#), also wrote a thinner and much more spiritual book, [How to Find Your Mission in Life](#). First, can we accept a mission in life as a need? If not, perhaps we should consider the success of people—and churches—without a mission. In it, Bolles offers a basic rule, one which I've borrowed into my list of 10 rules for living which Bo asked us to think about awhile back. Here it is: *Pray as though everything depends on God, and work as though everything depends on you.*

That can sound pretty vigorous, right? I offer it as a sort of judgment buffer between total, childlike dependence upon the largesse of God and the arrogance of total, prideful self-reliance.

Do you remember the original *Poseidon Adventure* movie, the one from the 1970's? There were two ministers in that story, one played by Gene Hackman and the other, more briefly,

by the wonderful character actor Arthur O'Connell. When the ship capsized, O'Connell's character took a pass on proactive response and remained in the overturned salon with the weak, infirm, and injured, praying for deliverance. He and his companions didn't last long. The more vigorous Hackman character, insisting that God helps those who help themselves, led a small group to eventual rescue, but like Moses, didn't complete the trip himself. He actively sacrificed his own life to enable the escape of the others. Well, that was just a movie, but illustrates the incompleteness, to my mind, of each extreme.

For if we take "Ask, and it will be given to you" to a logical extreme, do we turn God into a great munificent enabler in the sky? Matthew Stoll offers an answer:

"God enjoys providing for our needs, but the truth for most of us in the United States is that we have everything we need, or at least everything we think we need. We have food (our cupboards are probably full with plenty of food and a variety), clothing (probably several shirts and pants), shelter (many of us probably own our own house), a job (unless you are retired in which God provides an income). So do we even need to bother with praying for God's provision, "give us our daily bread?"

"Yes, because by praying this prayer we aren't just asking for God to provide for our needs, we are recognizing it is God who has provided for us. The reason we have food on the table is because God has given us the physical ability to work. God has given us the gifts and talents to do our job. In a very real sense the reason we have daily bread, and a roof over your head is because God provided. It might have been the sweat of your brow, but it was the Lord who gave you the ability and the blessing to be successful.

"In Deuteronomy 8, the Israelite people, after wandering in the desert for 40 years (eating the bread from heaven everyday), were preparing to enter the Promised Land, a land the Bible says was flowing with milk and honey. In other words, the land would produce bountifully, especially compared to the desert they were coming from. But God gave them this warning before they entered (from Deuteronomy 8):

11b Beware that in your plenty you do not forget the LORD your God and disobey his commands, regulations, and laws. 12 For when you have become full and prosperous and have built fine homes to live in, 13 and when your flocks and herds have become very large and your silver and gold have multiplied along with everything else, 14 that is the time to be careful. Do not become proud at that time and forget the LORD your God, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt. 15 Do not forget that he led you through the great and terrifying wilderness with poisonous snakes and scorpions, where it was so hot and dry. He gave you water from the rock! 16 He fed you with manna in the wilderness, a food unknown to your ancestors. He did this to humble you and test you for your own good. 17 He did it so you would never think that it was your own strength and energy that made you wealthy."

It is easy at times to forget that God gives us the power to have all our needs met. When we pray "give us this day our daily bread" we are reminding ourselves by whose hand we are truly fed, and are moved into an attitude of thankfulness to God. We are also reminded of our

responsibility to share with others who have less than we do. God uses us in response to the prayer of another person, somewhere, for “daily bread.” As the bumper sticker says, “God has blessed the world. Some people are just bad at sharing.”

In John 6, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. . . Yes, I am the bread of life! . . . the bread from heaven gives eternal life to everyone who eats it.

One of our greatest *needs* is to be spiritually fed. Jesus offers us spiritual nourishment through him and his presence in our life. He is the bread from heaven that provides every day.

What are your needs this morning? What do you need God to provide for you? Please think about this as we go into a time of prayer so you can lift up your needs to God. Ask and it will be granted to you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened to you.