

Matthew 6:5-15
Thoughts and Prayers
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Recently, I was at the hospital, waiting with one of our members before surgery. As the time for surgery drew near, I suggested we pray together, so we wouldn't hold up the nurse when he or she came to get her for surgery. Just after we finished praying, her doctor came in for the pre-surgery visit. After making sure he was planning to operate on the right part of her, he asked if she wanted him to say a prayer with her. She said, "Actually, we just finished praying. This is my minister." He took one look at me and said, "I'd like to pray again."

A friend of mine was in a meeting at her church and the group was trying to make a decision about something which there had been some disagreement. One of the people in the meeting, began his remarks by saying, "I have prayed about this and God told me we should _____." My friend said that after he spoke, the energy in the room dropped. Nobody else shared their opinion, and eventually the group decided in favor of that man's point of view. As she reflected later on this experience, she felt that the way he prefaced his comment, "I have prayed about this and God told me..." made others afraid to disagree because, who disagrees with God?

A young person in a youth group I led was part of a very successful high school football team. They went to the state championship and, as you can imagine, they wanted to win really badly. Before the game, the team prayed together. And then they lost. The boys were devastated. The boy who was part of my youth group was furious with God who, according to him, clearly did not listen to their prayer.

I titled this sermon “Thoughts and Prayers” because I want to draw our attention to a very real PR problem that we have as Christians. You see, when people are suffering and we can actively do something to help and, instead of doing something, we say, “Our thoughts and prayers are with you,” we are using an important part of our faith to turn our backs on our brothers and sisters. And that’s not okay. Prayer cannot replace helping people. Prayer is part of helping people, but I find in most cases that we are the answer to someone’s prayers. I hope if nothing else, our prayer life convicts us of the importance of that.

Today’s text is about prayer, but before we get to that specifically, I want to get us situated and on the same page regarding where we are in the Gospel of Matthew. We have come to what we call the Sermon on the Mount. It’s important to note that this is not a verbatim report of a speech Jesus gave on a quaint Galilean hillside. While it does contain materials that go back to the historical Jesus, the present form of the speech is a construction by the author of Matthew specifically for his community of Jesus followers. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes (which we heard last week)...Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, etc. These statements are prophetic declarations on the coming and already present kingdom of God. They are pronouncements on the blessedness of the ones, presumably in the Matthean community, who orient their lives toward God and God’s vision for the world.

The purpose of this sermon, composed well after Jesus’ death, was to teach the people in the author’s community how to live in the Greco-Roman world as a community of Jewish people who believed Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting on...the one who would save them from oppression (the oppression of Rome) and bring lasting peace. Not all Jewish people believed Jesus was the Messiah, so there was tension, not only between them and the Romans, but also amongst themselves. Matthew used this sermon as kind of a Life in Community 101 course.

The structural and theological center of the Sermon on the Mount is today's text, which contains the material Christians have traditionally used as the basis for The Lord's Prayer. I'm reading from the Scholars Version which is a translation of five gospel writings (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, *and* Thomas). What makes this translation different from other English translations is there has been special care taken to preserve the authentic voice of each individual author, giving the reader a more accurate representation of what the original listeners would have heard (keeping in mind the original audience would have heard this text, rather than read it). Here is Matthew 6:5-15.

⁵ "And when you pray, don't act like the phonies. They love to stand up and pray in houses of worship and on street corners, so they can show off in public. I swear to you, their prayers have been answered!

⁶ When you pray, go into a room by yourself and shut the door behind you. Then pray to your Father, the hidden one. And your Father with his eye for the hidden will applaud you.

⁷ And when you pray you should not babble on as the pagans do. They imagine that the length of their prayers will command attention.

⁸ So don't imitate them. After all. Your Father knows what you need before you ask.

⁹ Instead you should pray like this:

Our Father in the heavens,

Your name be revered

¹⁰ Impose your imperial rule,

Enact your will on earth as you have in heavens.

¹¹ Provide us with the bread we need for the day.

¹² Forgive our debts

To the extent we have forgiven those in debt to us.

¹³ And please don't subject us to test after test,

And rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their failures and offenses, your heavenly Father will also forgive yours.

¹⁵ And if you don't forgive the failures and mistakes of others, your Father won't forgive yours.

I mentioned earlier that some of the author's material in this section can be traced back to the historical Jesus with some degree of certainty. While, I don't think this is the most important thing about this text, I do know there is some curiosity about what parts of this prayer are likely to be most authentic to Jesus. Pope Francis caused quite a stir a while ago when he talked about his interpretation of the Lord's Prayer. According to scholars that I trust, if we based our Lord's Prayer on only the parts Jesus is likely to have said, it would sound like this:

*Our Father, your name be revered.

¹⁰ Impose your imperial rule

¹¹ Provide us with the bread we need for the day.

¹² Forgive our debts to the extent we have forgiven those in debt to us.

When we pray at the communion table this morning, we will try out this prayer instead of the longer, more traditional version. I welcome conversation about how it feels to you. I do hope it will take us out of "auto pilot mode," making us just uncomfortable enough to think something new. Like Pope Francis, I have no plan to change it permanently. The fact that the Christian tradition has created a version of this prayer, memorized it, and used it as "The Lord's Prayer" was not really the author of Matthew's intent and certainly not Jesus' either. It was meant to be a model of prayer for Matthew's community. In fact, first, Matthew gives some general prayer instructions up front.

The admonition to “go into to a room by yourself” is a way of saying, first of all, that anywhere we address God is a holy place. Whether we are in a sanctuary or a supermarket, when we pray, it is sacred space. Secondly, praying for the sake of being heard by human beings misses the point as far as Matthew is concerned. Prayer, he believed, should be directed at God and God alone. From Matthew’s perspective, the value of prayer is not in its effect on the one praying or the ones overhearing the prayer, but on God hearing the prayer. Prayer, for the author, is worship and worship is about God, not human beings.

Well, yes and no. Yes, worship is about God. But I have a different perspective about prayer. I tend to think the value of prayer is wrapped up in community. When we pray together and when we pray for each other, we are reminded that we are not alone. I go to the hospital to pray with people before surgery because I want them to see with their own eyes that they are not alone. I go, representing God and representing all of you. And then I pray for things like healing for the patient and wisdom and compassion for the caregivers. I don’t think my prayer for healing is the reason the person heals and I know plenty of people who heal without a single prayer being uttered.

And I think about the times in my life when I have heard people pray for me; how their words touched my heart and allowed me to hear the person’s love and care for me. How do you feel when you hear someone pray for you by name? Hearing the prayers of others gives us courage to face the next thing, patience to wait for the next thing, joy to live into the next thing, and the will to stand in the present, in whatever is the now thing.

*Theologian Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.” And I would maybe add “and to change the one who is being prayed for.”

Matthew continues, "Do not babble on like the pagans do." This could be a caution against the invocation of multiple gods, the ritual repetition of prayer formulas, or any prayer that is insincere or contingent on saying just the right thing in the right order. After all, prayers are not spells. The idea is to communicate and be drawn into relationship, with God and, I believe, with other people.

The model for prayer begins in verse nine with, "Our Father," not "my" father or "your" father, but "ours." God belongs to all of us. Jesus understood himself not only in terms of his relationship with God, but also in terms of his relationship as sibling to all of God's children. We are family. He used the Aramaic word, "Abba," (which is translated "father") to address God. Among Judeans the name of God was sacred and was not to be pronounced. Yet Jesus used a familiar, warmer, more personal, form of address and then asked that the name be regarded as sacred (revered or hallowed)---a contradiction that seems characteristic of Jesus' teachings. Fun fact: We don't know of anyone prior to Jesus to use this word to address God and it was very important to Matthew and the other gospel writers, especially the author of John.

Next in the model for prayer are specific petitions-
3 petitions are referred to as "thou" (about God) petitions and 3 petitions are "we" (about us) petitions.

*The "thou" petitions are:

Your name be revered

Impose your rule

Enact your will

These are not exactly three separate petitions, but about the "final event" which early Jesus followers believed would happen soon and would, in turn, bring about these three things. All three are aspects of the central focus of Jesus' proclamation, the coming of the kingdom/empire/kin-dom of God.

Matthew's community would have also recognized the author's nod toward scripture and tradition. We've talked before about the importance Matthew placed on tying Jesus to the Israelite tradition, specifically to Moses.

Jesus said: Our Father-Moses, having received the commandments on Mt. Sinai said: You shall have no other gods before me.

Jesus: Your name be revered-Moses: You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God

Jesus: Enact your will on earth as you have in heavens – Moses:

Remember the sabbath day, keep it holy. What's the best picture of what heaven is like, says one rabbi, "the Sabbath."

Matthew's point-Jesus will save the people from Rome just like Moses saved the people from Egypt.

*The three We petitions which, from a literary standpoint, balance out the three Thou petitions are:

Provide our bread for today

Forgive our debts

Do not subject us to test after test

Provide our bread (give us our daily bread) has been interpreted in a number of ways. I tend to like the simplest interpretation and the most obvious. We need to eat to survive and we know there are a whole lot of people who don't have enough to eat. The same was true in Jesus' time and in the author of Matthew's. Forgive our debts/sins. I don't believe we are born sinners, but I do believe it doesn't take any of us long to discover sin. Fortunately, God forgives us even before we forgive ourselves most of the time and certainly before we forgive other people, which we are called to do. And last, the phrase, "do not subject us to test after test" (do not lead us into temptation) which has come up in worship meetings and in the sermon discussion group. This was the line Pope Francis talked about as well. The question is, does

God test us or lead us into temptation? Is this really something we need to pray about?

Likely, this phrase references the “final event” as well. Think Apocalypse theology. How many of you read *Left Behind* by Timothy LaHaye? Before the final “victory of God,” the power of evil is intensified and the people of God endure tribulation and persecution. Matthew instructed his people to pray that God would not lead them into this time of testing when the pressure might be so great that it would overcome their faith. That’s probably the intended interpretation. However, Disciples minister and scholar, Fred Craddock wrote, “Though originally primarily eschatological, the petition for deliverance from the final testing...has a present dimension. The ordinary testings and temptations should be seen not as petty offenses, but as manifestations of the ultimate power of evil. The disciple is instructed not to take them too lightly...” In other words, we should recognize our own sin and knock it off.

Any one of these petitions could be used as a model for prayer by itself. It could stand alone and serve as a spring board for zeroing in on more specific challenges or questions or ideas. Prayer doesn’t have to be about asking for something. It can help us focus us on something outside ourselves, which, in my own life, I have found to cause me to over and over again reorient my life away from my own selfishness toward God’s desires for me and for the world. I need to be reminded every once in a while, that life is not “all about me.” Once, I heard a priest say, “Prayer is a chance to find out what God is up to in your life.” Truthfully, my guess is, we could go around this room and get many different answers to the questions, “What is prayer?” and “How does prayer work?”

*I don’t know. Maybe I know...I feel close to God and to other people when I pray. In the grand scheme of things, I have come to believe that

I don't understand much about God at all. That's why we're all here, right? Maybe a good idea for a tag line for DCC is: Got questions? We do too. I hope we never stop searching for answers and asking questions. And in all the searching and asking, I think we will find God and we will find each other. Amen.