

*It is midnight, and your cell phone rings. You jump out of your skin, fearful that something terrible has happened. But it's only your next-door neighbor: "oh, did I wake you?" he sheepishly asks. "Sorry I didn't realize it was so late." He tells you that an old college friend has dropped by unexpectedly and he's wondering if you have some beer and pretzels. You've had a long day and you can't believe he is bothering you with this. So you hang up, roll over, and go back to that sweet dream you were having. But a few minutes later your door bell is ringing and so you drag yourself out of bed and you give him the Sam Adams and the pretzels.*

I love it that Jesus doesn't preach like a fancy theologian who uses big words like eschatology and soteriology and hermeneutics to say what he means. He tells stories from everyday life. He takes examples that anyone can relate to, even when his deeper meaning sometimes remains elusive. He makes us think, rather than giving us easy answers. Jesus finds God in the midst of people baking bread or showing kindness to a stranger or waking up a neighbor for some late-night reveling, and he invites us to do the same.

Today's gospel reading is an invitation for us to reflect on prayer, and that begins with learning to open our eyes to the world around us—it begins in discovering God not as confined to some distant place in the skies, but right in our very midst. Prayer, the mystics have said, is waking up to the presence of God. *So don't be afraid to ask God for what you need*, Jesus tells his disciples—not just the Twelve in the first-century but the community of his friends gathered here today. You aren't afraid to wake up your neighbor when you need help. Why, then, are you so reluctant to turn to God when you need help. *Ask and you shall receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened.*

Preaching about prayer is perhaps the theological equivalent of apple pie or motherhood: everyone is *for* it even when we aren't always sure what *it* is. But my hope today is that as we contemplate the prayer that our Lord himself taught us to pray, we might move beyond pious platitudes. As we reflect on these words from the eleventh chapter of Luke's Gospel, I hope we might do so in a way that allows us to go a bit deeper, by finding ways that help us to follow Jesus more clearly, more dearly, and more nearly.

Notice that the disciples assume that praying is something that needs to be learned. It is not automatic; it is not an innate skill we are born with. The disciples see Jesus praying and they ask him to teach them how to pray. We too, need teachers along the way, and over time our prayer lives will develop and change. In the same way that our reading skills move from *Goodnight Moon* to *Harry Potter* to *Wuthering Heights*—so, too, our prayer lives need to evolve as we continue to grow into the full stature of Christ. Prayer takes practice, and in this way is no different from learning how to play the piano or hockey.

We begin by saying, "*our Father.*" Now the careful exegetes in the room will notice that in Luke it is just "Father," but I want to deviate from Luke for just a moment and go with the more familiar version from the sixth chapter of Matthew's Gospel because I think that little word "our" is very important. It's especially important because of our tendency to substitute the word "my" without really thinking about it. In the older and less inclusive language of a bygone era, we said that implicit in this word is the "brotherhood of man" – a phrase that means to suggest that if God is not only *my* Father but *our* Father, then you and I are family.

Now I've just returned from a week with my family of origin. So I am profoundly aware that families don't just sit around holding hands and singing *Kum-ba-ya* together all the time playing Scrabble. Each of us carry old wounds and patterns of behavior and sometimes those wounds are accentuated when we are in close proximity to those who know us best. To say it more directly: sometimes when families get together forty-somethings can revert to the behaviors they perfected as teenagers when they relate to each other. Maybe your family isn't that way, but mine sometimes is.

So I don't want to romanticize or idealize "family." In fact, just the opposite—all family is complicated, but still, you can't divorce your sister or your brother. You can't change the facts of DNA and you can't change the fact that those very behaviors you see so clearly in your sister which are most annoying are almost certainly present in you. The bonds of family are existential, and it's the same for the baptized community as well. Anglicans can fight the same way families fight and even kick each other off committees, but no pronouncement by an Archbishop or anyone else can negate what Christ himself has claimed: that though we are many we are One. We are members of each other and children of God. All who pray "our Father" are our sisters and brother, even if we aren't yet ready to see that.

Now that second word, "Father" creates too many difficulties to delve into on a summer day. Suffice it to say this: the Bible emerged in a patriarchal world and we are right to critique the overabundance of male images for God, even as we uncover the surprising (if too often neglected) female images that are scattered throughout Scripture in spite of patriarchy. We should be clear that "Father" is a metaphor and that God is not male: like every image for God, this one is meant to point beyond itself to the God who is beyond gender, the God who is both and neither. Some of you may recall the version of the Lord's Prayer we have used here from the New Zealand Prayerbook that tackles this head-on by paraphrasing the Lord's prayer: "Father and Mother of us all..." We could spend a lot more time on these issues, but for today I want to simply remind you that the word Jesus uses in Aramaic is "*Abba*" which is not a formal word, but a deeply intimate and relational word. It's more "daddy" than Father; more "momma" than Mother. To claim that our relationship with God is like the relationship between parents and children is of course fraught with danger, because earthly moms and dads do not always live up to the vocation of healthy parenting. Still, this invitation to be part of the baptized community is about healing old wounds and beginning again.

Yet there is a creative tension here: even as Jesus teaches us to call God "*Abba*," he reminds us that God's name is holy: *hallowed be God's name!* Which is to say that God's holiness—God's tremendous mystery—is beyond all of our language and understanding. No sooner do we dare to address God as *Abba* than we are also reminded (as Moses was at the burning bush) that God is who God is and God will be whom God will be. No sooner are we reminded that God is as close as our breath, than we are also reminded that God is beyond our comprehension and all of our labels. How can both of these be true? Well, the truth is that if both are not true then it isn't God we are talking about anymore. If God is drawn too close we are in danger of worshipping an idol of our own making. But if God is held too far away, we end up worshipping the Clockmaker of the Deists—a God who set the world in motion and then stepped back and let it be. In these opening words of this simple and familiar prayer a great mystery is uncovered: God's intimate familiarity in tension with God's mysterious otherness. God is both here and beyond our knowing.

*Thy kingdom come.* *Kingdom* suggests kings, of whom we don't tend to be very fond in a democratic republic; it also sounds like a place, a heavenly realm *up there*. I think that it is therefore helpful to translate the Greek word "*basilea*" as the "*reign of God*" because it gets more at the activity of what

God does rather than a galaxy far away. What is it like for us when God's ways begin to break into our lives and our world to bring about healing and transformation and new possibilities? Remember how Jesus describes the Reign of God: it's like a mustard seeds that begin small and grows into something much more incredible; about dinner parties where outcasts are welcomed; about the last being first and the first being last (which is a way of speaking about power). The Reign of God is about the fullness of time when every tear is wiped dry and there is no longer pain or suffering. But in every moment in time when we get a glimpse of that reality, the Reign of God is very near us. We are called as followers of Jesus to live out of, and more fully into, that reality and pray for it to come fully, on earth as it is in heaven.

*Give us this day our daily bread...* When we ask for daily bread we remember the ancient wisdom of the Sinai and the miracle of the manna, as well as the more contemporary insights of twelve-step programs: *life can only be lived one day at a time*. Even as we live toward the Kingdom of God, we do that by being present to this moment in time which will never come our way again. We ask God for daily bread, for daily strength, for daily sustenance so that we can live our lives one step at a time and not become paralyzed either by regret and guilt about a past we cannot change, or worried and fearful about a future we cannot control. When we ask God to give us our daily bread, we are learning how to let go and trust God.

*Forgive us our sins...* I could preach a dozen sermons on forgiveness and only scratch the surface. Much ink has been spilled on the way we are meant to understand the relationship between God's forgiveness of us and our need to forgive others. Is our forgiveness by God *contingent* on how well we forgive others? That is a difficult question. But for today I hope it is enough to simply say that forgiveness is a two-way street. If we passively *receive* forgiveness from God and others for every wrong we commit, but then dwell on and feed every wrong committed against us, then we are not yet living this prayer. On the other hand, if we are constantly forgiving others who hurt us, but remain unable to accept the fact that we too, are accepted and forgiven then we become doormats who deny that we, too, are holy and forgivable children of God. God's mercy and grace are for us, too! *Forgiveness flows in both directions: we are both forgiven and called to forgive*. Don't for a moment think that I am suggesting this is easy to do. But the prayer that is at the heart of our faith reminds us that it is indeed the goal.

Finally, we ask God to save us from times of trial, of testing, of temptation. It seems to me that this speaks for itself. None of us will escape some wilderness times in our lives. But we ask God to keep us from those times, knowing we are vulnerable and life is hard enough on the good days. And when the bad days do come we remember our Lord faced times of trial and is with us in ours.

*The Book of Common Prayer* defines prayer as "...responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words." The Lord's Prayer offers us words that are first memorized, and then learned by heart. (And there is a difference!) But then we are called to pray it not only with our lips, but with our lives: to live it in the world, to let it shape the people, by the grace of God, that we are becoming.