

St. James Lutheran Church
Pentecost IX
July 25, 2010
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First Reading: Genesis 18:20-32
Second Reading: Colossians 26-19
Gospel: Luke 11:1-13

Why Pray?

How many times have you prayed the Lord's Prayer? When you do the math, it has to be in the thousands. We speak or sing this prayer every Sunday. It's included in every wedding & funeral. Every church council meeting and many committee meetings close with this prayer. Many people pray this prayer as part of their personal daily devotions. Lutherans have long studied this prayer in great detail in preparation for confirmation. Even after my mother could no longer remember who I was when I visited her, she could pray this prayer word for word, along with me

When Jesus first taught this prayer to his disciples, I wonder if he realized how enduring it would be.

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Many of us know this prayer so well we can say it without thinking much about it. That's a problem. It's like the Pledge of Allegiance – we can rattle it off on auto-pilot. I worked one summer as a guard at the State Training School for Boys in St. Charles. I was on the night shift, 10 to 6, and the first order of business was putting the boys to bed in the large dormitory they shared. When they all had their pajamas on, the grizzled old guard I worked with would growl, "Catholics" – and all the Catholic boys would kneel by their beds and pray a "Hail Mary." When they finished, he would growl again, "Protestants" and all the rest would kneel and say the Lord's Prayer. They said all the words – but it never felt much like a prayer. It was just something they did because they were supposed to.

We're familiar with the difference between "saying" the Lord's Prayer and "praying" it.

Luther admitted that even with the best intentions, the mind can wander and lose focus when we try to pray. Luther marveled at the single-minded attention his dog would focus on a piece of meat he held in his hand. Nothing could distract that dog; nothing else mattered as long as he held that morsel before him. Luther wished he could be that focused on God when he prayed. Truly, the purity of heart is to will one thing – most of us find our hearts often divided and distracted.

Why do we pray this prayer, anyway? When we manage to do it right, what does it accomplish?

Certainly we don't pray the Lord's Prayer in order to remind God to do the right thing! God is good, all the time – without any coaxing or reminding from us. God doesn't wait to be asked to do what needs going. God doesn't tally up our prayers like votes in an election.

Instead, prayer is giving God the opportunity to remind and remold us. You & I are the ones inclined to lose track of who God is and who we are called to be as God's people. When we pay attention, the Lord's Prayer has the power to get us back on track.

Time and again in his Small Catechism, Luther reminds us, that the Lord's Prayer is intended to shape our hearts & minds, not God's.

We pray:

* “Hallowed be thy name”

“God’s name is holy in itself, but we ask in this prayer that we may keep it holy”
We do this by paying attention to God’s word and living our lives in harmony with it

* “Thy Kingdom Come”

God’s Kingdom comes indeed without our praying for it, but we ask in this prayer that it may come also to us.” God didn’t wait to be asked to send Jesus into this world. None of us asked Jesus to die on the cross – and we surely had nothing to do with his resurrection! The Kingdom comes to us through the grace of baptism, and the grace to live our lives by faith in Christ.

* “Thy will be done”

“The good and gracious will of God is surely done without our prayers, but we ask in this prayer that it may be done also among us.” We ask God to use us as instruments of his grace and peace.

* “Give us this day our daily bread”

“God gives daily bread, even without our prayer, to all people, though sinful, but we ask in this prayer that God will help us to realize this and to receive our daily bread with thanks.” We don’t have to remind God to take care of us and provide for us. We do need reminding that all we have is a gift from God. We need to remember to be grateful.

* Likewise, God doesn’t need to be reminded to be gracious and merciful. God is more eager to forgive than we are to seek forgiveness. The Lord’s Prayer is a continuing reminder of our need for mercy: both to humbly seek it and gladly share it.

So in the Lord’s Prayer, we pray not so much to get something, but rather to become something. We pray to become more like Jesus.

The Lord’s Prayer is not our vehicle for expressing a list of wants & wishes – it’s our way of learning & re-learning what it is we should truly want.

Sometimes we can think of God as like Santa Claus, waiting to hear what we want so he can give it to us.

In this prayer Jesus teaches us to want what is best, what we need most of all.

It’s always tempting to approach prayer as a kind of negotiation or bargaining: “I’ll do this God, if you’ll do that for me....” Even Jesus experienced this temptation. In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed earnestly that he might be spared that terrible ordeal. Yet he concluded his prayer: “Not my will, but they will be done.” That’s the great challenge of following Christ – to actually want to become like him. To pray as Jesus teaches means surrendering all our personal agendas – and embracing God’s agenda. Which is why we should never pray the Lord’s Prayer without some measure of fear and trembling. We pray this prayer, trusting God to be God for us. We pray in order to stay connected to the vine – because without him, we can do nothing.

A few thoughts on the Lord's Prayer:

I cannot pray *Our*, if my faith has no room for others and their need.

I cannot pray *Father*, if I do not demonstrate this relationship to God in my daily living.

I cannot pray *who art in heaven*, if all of my interests and pursuits are earthly things.

I cannot pray *hallowed be thy name*, if I am not striving, with God's help, to be holy.

I cannot pray *thy kingdom come*, if I am unwilling to accept God's rule in my life.

I cannot pray *thy will be done*, if I am unwilling or resentful of having it in my life.

I cannot pray *on earth as it is in Heaven*, unless I am truly ready to give myself to God's service here and now.

I cannot pray *give us this day our daily bread*, without expending honest effort for it, or if I would withhold from my neighbor the bread that I receive.

I cannot pray *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*, if I continue to harbor a grudge against anyone.

I cannot pray *lead us not into temptation*, if I deliberately choose to remain in a situation where I am likely to be tempted.

I cannot pray *deliver us from evil*, if I am not prepared to fight evil with my life and my prayer.

I cannot pray *thine is the kingdom*, if I am unwillingly to obey the King.

I cannot pray *thine is the power and the glory*, if I am seeking power for myself and my own glory first.

I cannot pray *forever and ever*, if I am too anxious about each day's affairs.

I cannot pray *Amen*, unless I honestly say, "Cost what it may, this is my prayer."

-Anonymous