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Sermon: Teach Us to Pray
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St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore, Ohio
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Luke 11:1-13

One day a lawyer told an attorney friend that he had become a Sunday School teacher at his church. His friend was amazed and expostulated, "I'll bet you five bucks you don't even know the Lord's Prayer," he fumed. "Why everybody knows that," the other answered. "It's, Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

His friend was astonished! He pulled out his wallet and handed him five dollars, saying, "You win! I didn't know you knew so much about the Bible."

There are a lot of people who don't know about the Lord's Prayer and the people who do know about the Lord's Prayer have a lot of questions about it. For example, why do we pray a formal memorized prayer in the first place. It is not entirely clear that Jesus was giving the disciple a set prayer that the disciples and followers of Jesus were to use, word for word. He might simply have been giving them an example of how to pray, using simple and direct language, in contrast to flowery and complicated language used in prayers in formal Temple worship or in prayers by people who wanted to impress everyone with their religiousness and brilliant theology. Jesus may have been saying, "keep it simple" rather than prescribing a particular prayer. The Mormons do not use the Lord's Prayer in worship because they interpret Jesus' words in this way.

On the other hand, the prayer does come from Jesus. Why not use the prayer Jesus taught us? It also serves as a unifying device so that Christians everywhere can join together in prayer and worship by reciting its words. Finally, the prayer offers some powerful theology about who we are, people who need help, and who God is, the One who can give us the help we need.

Another question: some people ask for forgiveness from debts (as we do) while others ask for forgiveness from sins and others for forgiveness of trespasses. Why don't all Christians pray the same version of the Lord's Prayer? Christians pray different versions of the Lord's Prayer, in part, because Luke and Matthew give us two different versions of the same prayer. For example, Matthew uses "debts," but Luke uses "sins." Scholars think that Luke's version is probably closer to the words Jesus used, but in fact we, and most Christian churches, use the version from Matthew in our community prayers when we gather for worship.

In our church we pray that God will forgive our debts... that comes from Matthew, although trespasses is also a familiar translation. Luke uses "sins," but combines that with indebtedness in the second half of the petition. Regardless of which word we use, the idea is that our relationship with God is one where we need God's forgiveness. We are indebted to God for our very being

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and we do not always want to remember that debt or acknowledge that debt; we need debt forgiveness. We sin against God and our behavior disgraces God; we need sin forgiveness. We trespass; we break God's commandments; we need trespass forgiveness.

In the Lord's Prayer we also acknowledge that we need to forgive others. The prayer emphasizes our forgiveness of those who owe us, of those who sin against us, of those who trespass against us. The relationship between God and human beings and relationships between human beings themselves move on parallel tracks. Both require forgiveness for right relationship and for true life.

Another reason that Christians do not all pray the same Lord's Prayer: the prayers in Matthew and Luke end kind of abruptly. They seem to call out for an ending. The early church added an ending, a doxology, a hymn of praise to close out the prayer. It appeared in a document called the Didache, probably written in the latter half of the first century; the words added to the prayer were "and yours is the power and the glory, forever. Amen."

Later in the 4th and the 5th centuries, some scribes added to manuscripts of the Gospel according to Matthew "for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, for ever. Amen." That may have come from blessing language in 1 Chronicles 29:11-13 in the Old Testament. Scribes also altered manuscripts so that Luke's version was harmonized with the text in Matthew.

Let's not spend all our time however on the history of the prayer that we pray in worship. Let's take a few moments to look at the words themselves. The words are simple and straightforward; the language is not particularly complicated.

The first word in the prayer is "our." This is a prayer that is meant to be prayed by a community in worship. Yes, I know we pray the prayer individually on our own behalf. I do that as well. But it is also fitting that we say the prayer as part of our worship every Sunday morning. It is a community prayer, as well as being a prayer each of us offers individually.

Second word in the prayer: "Father." Good word, and a word Jesus himself used in prayer. It is meant to convey the intimacy of our relationship with God, as God would have us be in relationship. This is not a god who is far away from our lives; this is the God of Israel who is intimately involved in the lives of individuals and of the community at large.

Well, you might say, it is a little on the patriarchal side of things. And you would be right. We could try to substitute something more neutral, such as "Creator." But then we would merely be creatures talking with our Creator, a very functional relationship and not a very personal or intimate one.

We could use "Mother" or "Parent" instead of "Father" to reduce patriarchy in the prayer. And people have done that. The problem is that Jesus did not use those words, and it is not clear that they mean exactly what Jesus meant when he addressed the prayer to God, the Father.

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I continue to use the word “Father” in praying the Lord’s Prayer for two reasons. Jesus used the word to refer to God. And, I don’t have a better alternative... yet... but I’m open to suggestions and discussion.

The prayer asks for a world in which God’s name is “hallowed,” that is, that all of God’s creatures should regard God as holy and set apart, to pledge allegiance, as it were, to God, and to recognize, respect and worship God as the Lord who alone is true and living. It also asks, “thy kingdom come,” for the establishment and fulfillment of God’s kingdom, a prayer often offered by Jesus; the kingdom was a very large part of his teaching. Taken together these two requests asks for a world in which everyone recognizes God, is pointed towards God, and can participate in the fullness of God’s creation as God intended. The prayer next asks “thy will be done,” a third petition that is a perfect corollary of the petitions for hallowing God’s name and establishing God’s kingdom.

The prayer then turns to requests regarding the human condition. First, “give us this day our daily bread.” In Jesus’ time, and for much of human history, human beings have lived from day to day... and they have often been hungry. The newly freed Hebrew slaves depended on a special kind of bread, manna, from God in the wilderness. Manna did not keep for more than a day. That is a reminder that each day for them was a new day of depending on God. So also in Jesus’ time, 1500 or so years later, there were laborers who had been dispossessed from the land God had given them. They were dependent on finding work each day, work that would pay enough to feed them and feed their families. Mostly their food would have been bread, barley bread. This petition is a prayer for survival addressed to the God who is capable and willing to give us what we need for survival.

The final petition relates to our being tempted by evil, or being tempted by “the evil one,” the devil ... lead us not into temptation and save us from evil. A too-quick reading suggests that the prayer asks God not to tempt us. Carl Jung, the famous psychoanalyst, quit being a Christian because he did not like the notion of a God who tempts us.

But it is not God who tempts, it is evil or the evil one who tempts us. (James 1:13 NRSVUE) “No one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.”

God does test us. He tested the Hebrew people in the wilderness. He tested Abraham. And he does permit us to be tested by temptation. It was the Holy Spirit who led the newly baptized Jesus into the wilderness so that Satan could test him. And it is God who gives us the strength and the faith to resist temptation.

We could wish or pray that God would eliminate all temptations. However, God created us with free will. When God created Adam and Eve, he did not require that they love him. That was their choice. We would not be human without the freedom to make choices in the face of temptation. And we would not be fully human if we do not rely on God for help as we confront those times of temptation. Again, from James (1:2, 1:12 NRSVUE) “My brothers and sisters, whenever you

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face various trials, consider it all joy, ..." and "Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."

This awkwardly worded, at least to our ears, line in the Lord's Prayer testifies to our weakness and need for God to keep us out of situations when might be tempted. The line continues, as written in Luke, "do not bring us to the time of trial." That refers to the belief by Christians that before Jesus returns, the forces of evil will make one final push to forestall the coming Kingdom in its fullness. We will be tested and tried as never before. God stands ready in that moment to help us.

We seek God's help in following God's will. We seek God's help in keeping us from being sidetracked from following God's will. The petition to God is an acknowledgement that only God has power and sovereignty beyond and over that of the devil or evil. It rests on a recognition that God is willing to act to help us in tough situations and can help us make it through.

One more word about that last request to God for help in times of trouble, in times of temptation, in times of trial. Bishop T.D. Jakes... you may have seen him on television... he is Bishop or pastor of The Potter's House, a church with 30,000 members in Dallas, TX. He is a powerful preacher from whom I have stolen, er, borrowed ideas in the past.

Bishop T. D. Jakes says that the two hardest words in the English language for us to say are "yes, Lord." The last petition of the Lord's Prayer ... lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil ... implicitly expresses a faith that God will help us times of trouble, and when he does, then we will bow to God's will and say "yes, Lord" and do what God wants us to do to get through that time of trial. Yes, Lord. Yes, Lord. Yes, Lord.

To God's will and to God's way,
Let the people say, ...
Yes, Lord.

With our whole heart
we will respond
Let the people say ...
Yes, Lord.

When God's Spirit speaks,
We will trust and obey
Let the people say ...
Yes, Lord.

Amen.