

Becoming the answer to our prayers

I must admit that I struggle with prayer. I never felt like it made a whole lot of sense to pray to God if we also affirm that in the words of Psalm 139 God “knows when I sit down and when I rise up; God discerns my thoughts from far away. . . . Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.” If God already knows what I am going to say, why say it at all? It seemed to me that prayer is even more absurd than talking to a telepath who can read your mind, because the author of Psalm 139 claims God knows what we are going to say even *before* we say it!

Yet at the same time everybody seems to pray in the Bible and prayer is the context of a lot of important things happening. And if, as Mary frequently reminds us, “we read the Bible as if our lives depended on it, because in fact they do, we can’t just ignore prayer. In this sermon I look at the Lord’s prayer as a script that shapes our lives to become the answer to our prayers.

Over the last few years, I have begun to rediscover prayer. I expanded beyond the script of the obligatory goodnight prayer spoken out loud while lying in bed before falling asleep. I have begun to deepen and broaden my understanding of what prayer by experimenting with morning devotions, body prayer, Taizé services, and other things. Some forms have been more helpful to me than others. But I’ve never been very successful in establishing a routine. Since we got married, Rianna and I have tried several times to start the day with a morning devotion from the amazing “Book of Common Prayer.” We usually made it a few days before one of us wanted to sleep in (usually me) or life became too stressful and we were happy to manage breakfast in the morning. Our longest streak was one week and then we congratulated ourselves so much on making it that we said we should get a sabbath from praying and then didn’t start again until several weeks later.

The reason I am sharing this is because in my experience talking about spiritual disciplines all too easily falls into the trap of spiritual perfectionism. And there is only one thing perfectionism leads to. Shame. Shame at not being able to live up to an impossible standard that no one ever lives up to but somehow we think everyone else does. That or a kind of prideful ignorance because you haven’t realized how you are not actually living up to the impossible standard.

Neither of these reactions has anything to do with the freedom of the gospel we see in Jesus and in which we participate as his disciples. When we look at Jesus we see someone who prays a lot—it is mentioned over and over again. But it’s not like that meant his will was always one with the will of his Father. At the end, in the garden, he prayed in sweat and anguish to “let this cup pass from me.” Just like Job and so many of the Psalms, Jesus had no issue with confronting God in prayer and showing his passionate objection. And then when he is in chains and about to be lynched we see Jesus pray the prayer of the freest human being ever: “Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Only somebody who is totally free can pray like that.

Looking at Jesus we see that prayer is not another task we have to do, but something that comes naturally to those who are in relationship with God. At the same time, we also read of the disciples falling asleep in that same garden that Jesus was wrestling with God over his future. And we read of them generally not getting it a lot. Note, again, that this is never an obstacle for Jesus loving them. But in order to grow as his followers, the disciples feel that they need to learn how to pray.

Perhaps this is why I was so drawn to Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. In Matthew’s version which is the more well known one, the prayer is part of the Sermon of the Mount framed by teaching about

praying. Luke's version in contrast begins with Jesus praying and the disciples asking Jesus to teach them how to pray. So basically what I was asking.

Another reason why I was drawn to this text over say Matthew's version is because it is less familiar. While we might know the general outline the way words are different or things are missing might just confuse us enough to pay attention once more to these too familiar words. So let's listen again to Jesus prayer.

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.

Notice how it is missing familiar parts? No "Our Father" no "on earth as it is in heaven" and no "thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever." All that's in Matthew's version. And even some small words are different. There's a kind of roughness to these words. To me it seems like Matthew solved all the theological problems and smoothed it out. So for today I say let's stick with Luke's version and see where it leads us. (*Sidenote: While I don't think it's wise to put too much weight on reconstructions of which text is closer to the words Jesus said to his followers, it's fairly safe to say that Luke's version is closer to Jesus' words, with one possible exception which will get to.*)

Father, hallowed be your name

Because of its familiarity, we might just miss most startling thing about this prayer. Jesus calls God, the creator of the universe, the one who led Israel out slavery in a pillar of cloud and fire by an affectionate name like Mommy or Pop. (To appreciate how outrageous this is remember the story when Moses wants to see God face-to-face and only gets to look at God's back through a crack in the rocks, but his face still shines for days after so he has to put a blanket over it. That's how ancient Israelites thought about the holiness of God.)

And please don't be confused because Jesus says "Father" here, we have enough female names and metaphors for God throughout the Bible to affirm that God is not a man. The point to what Jesus is saying here, is that he addresses the creator as parent and invites us to do the same. Prayer is an intimate act. It's about entering into a deepening relationship with God.

But what does it mean to hallow God's name? Like many of us, I grew up learning that swearing or saying "oh my God" was "taking the Lord's name in vain." These days I care less about that, and I have my theological reasons for that assessment. In the worldview of the ancient world, names had power. That's why our Jewish brothers and sisters do not pronounce the four letters of God's name when they read from the Torah, but replace it with "Adonai" - "My lord" or "HaShem" - "the name." Which is why it always makes me a little uncomfortable when Christians pretend like "Jahwe" is God's proper name. Because when Moses asks God for God's name, God answers in a riddle. Sadly the joke gets lost in translation, but it can mean I am who I am, or I will be who I will be, basically defying the conventional wisdom that names constrain the being. So I doubt God is too worried about us gaining power over God through misusing God's name.

But what we can do, is giving God a bad reputation. Which is kind of what is happening today. Why are young people turning away from the church? While there are many reasons one might consider, a

huge one is that their association with church is that Christians hate women, gay people, and science, and increasingly apparently also refugee children.

In our context hallowing God's name means to "reclaim the name of Jesus." To reclaim Jesus means refuse to let him be turned into a tool for political purposes. Reclaiming Jesus means remembering that Jesus was a refugee child himself, that he organized the poor and dispossessed across the dividing walls of his day into a social movement, and that this is what ultimately got him lynched by a self-proclaimed "moral majority" in cahoots with the biggest empire the world had seen until that point.

This act of reclaiming needs to happen on all levels of society, from our congregations and communities all the way up to the nation. But it also needs to happen in ourselves. Don't let me be misunderstood to say that all prayer is about is external. What I am saying is that becoming the answer to our prayers is both external and internal. If your upset that Christianity has a bad rep, start by doing your own work and examine where you have unknowingly imbibed an imperial and heretical version of Christianity centered on a white Jesus who blesses the comfortable and proclaims peace, peace, where there is no peace. To reclaim the name of Jesus we need to be disturbed by Jesus and by the kindom he proclaimed.

Your kindom come

The vision of the kindom of God shapes all of Jesus life. In Mark's gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry after his mentor John is arrested with these words: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." In Luke's gospel this account is fleshed out with a text from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The kingdom of God is "good news to the poor, release to the captives and the blind seeing again" All of these are things that Jesus does according to the Gospels. He is both shaped by the vision of the kindom and also becomes the answer to his prayers through his actions.

Jesus also tells parables to help people dispel their false ideas about what the kindom of God really is about. All prayer is concerned with the establishment of God's domination-free order, even something as seemingly trivial as a loaf of bread.

Our daily bread give us today

But what kind of person could call a loaf of bread "trivial?" Only someone who has never felt hunger and doesn't know how it can make the difference between life and death. It reminds me of the French queen Marie Antoinette who after hearing the peasants were protesting because they had no bread exclaimed in exasperation: "Well, let them eat cake!"

Going from the structure, this prayer for daily bread is the center of the prayer, a simple prayer for the sustenance necessary to survive the day.

In the words of the children's story from earlier this would be a "Help!" prayer. The most basic of all "Help!" prayers: a prayer for what's necessary to survive another day. It also connects to the Manna Story during Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt. In that old story Israel is hungry for the "meatpots of Egypt" and wants to go back to slavery. God responds by sending birds and a mysterious dew that chrystallizes as a wafer the Israelites call "manna"--literally "what is that?" The manna is always enough, but will go bad if you collect more than you need. God is trying to teach Israel to trust in God's provision through creation's abundance rather than the centralized grain stores and meat pots of empire they are used to. In the manna story and in Jesus' stories it is clear that everyone having enough to eat is part of God's vision for this world. In the kingdom of God there are no rumbling stomachs. But how can we proclaim this truth in a world where the food waste of this country alone is enough to feed

every under- and malnourished person in the world? Forty years ago, Ron Sider published his book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. The scandal of that title should be uncomfortable for us. From Latin America comes a meal-time prayer that to me is a good way to hold gratitude for having enough and desire for justice for all together. Some of you know it. Translated into English, the words are: “Lord bless to us our bread, and give bread to all those who are hungry, and hunger for justice to those who are fed, Lord bless to us our bread.”

Another way to become an answer to our prayer is to reduce our own use of the world’s resources. Mennonites have led the way in this, especially with the *More with Less* cookbook series. However we also still have a far way to go. One of the easiest ways to seriously decrease our personal impact is by reducing how much meat we eat. A recent study re-affirmed that meat production has a much higher impact on greenhouse gas emissions than often assumed. Around 40% of greenhouse gas emissions are directly or indirectly linked to meat production.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who are indebted to us.

Many people raised in the church struggle with this petition. Does it mean we should always forgive regardless of the circumstances. And what does it mean to forgive? I can’t answer these questions in this sermon, but I want to suggest that something else might be at stake in this prayer, namely the question of economic debts and the power they hold over our lives.

Matthew’s version uses a term that most directly means debt. Luke’s version uses “sin” but keeps the term “indebted.” (Sidenote: this is the place where I think Matthew is closer to the original.)

There is a connection between sin/ morality and debt in many languages reflecting an ideology that “debts must be repaid” regardless of the social or moral costs of austerity.

In contrast, Jesus is taking up the ancient tradition of jubilee and is proclaiming a debt release that starts at the grassroots. This prayer gives voice to popular cry for debt release and calls the community of faith to become the answer to its own prayers by practicing debt release wherever possible.

Three weeks ago I was staying with my friend Joshua in Philadelphia. My friend pastors Circle of Hope, a congregation of mainly millenials. As a church, they do a lot of interesting things to give new expression to the old story so people can hear it. When I arrived for instance, they were just wrapping up a song writing workshop where people in the congregation presented songs they had written for their Sunday evening worship services. But the most interesting project I heard about came right from the words of the Lord’s Prayer.

They realized how many in their congregation were in bondage to their credit cards. They had maxed out one or several cards and found themselves struggling to pay off the interest, much less the actual debt. More than just the financial pressure, this problem was leading to additional problems. People had to choose between food, rent, and their credit card payments. Shame about debt led to people lying or isolating themselves from friends.

Joshua realized that not only was this indebtedness a serious problem for each person individually, it was a problem for the whole congregation. The shame was eating away at the foundation of their community. Needless to say giving was also down. Taking his cue from the Lord’s prayer, Paul’s advice that “your surplus shall serve their lack,” and a working understanding of economics, Joshua developed a plan so that his community could become the answer to their prayers to “set the captives free”-- calling it “the Debt Annihilation Project.” He formed a group of ten people attending Circle of Hope with more debt than they could hope to repay. Collectively they owed around 25 000\$ at interest rates ranging from 29% to 7%. They covenanted with each other to cut up their credit cards, support each other, hold each other accountable through buddy systems and regular meetings, and to stick together until the end of the process. A financial educator was brought in to teach financial literacy and help each member make a plan for how much money they earned and spent, where it was possible to reduce

expenses, and how much they could pay each month to pay off the debt.

This process of mutual accountability and vulnerably sharing about their financial situation was important to help people see that “you are not a loan/alone.” Your debts do not define you, just as your wealth does not define you. But they didn’t stop there.

Joshua had convinced a friend of the congregation with significant savings to give 10.000\$ as seed money. They used the money to wipe out the debts with the highest interest rate. Everyone now paid what they could to pay off the debt with the second highest interest rate while paying only the minimum on the other debts. This way, they all managed to pay off their debt within a matter of months rather than years, and even replenish the seed money to go to the next group. They also saved around 12.000 \$ in interest. Right now they have their third group going through the process. Graduates of the Debt Annihilation program have started businesses, or become leaders in the church in ways they couldn’t afford to before because they were in bondage to credit card debt.

This is just one example of taking Jesus’ prayer seriously but it is one that keeps haunting me. What would it look like if churches everywhere were doing this? Talking about money is so taboo for many of us, that this would be a seriously counter-cultural initiative. If done right, it could deepen our relationships with each other, dispel the shame and isolation that accompanies debt and become a visible expression of God’s grace before the watching world.

Lead us not into temptation.

A good friend and mentor of mine is a recovering addict. There is not a day that goes by without him feeling led into temptation. This petition is hard for him. But the final petition of the prayer is an acknowledgment that there are always challenges bigger than us. While some people might have had philosophical problems with the petition, asking “does God lead into temptation?”

The intention here is clear: “There are temptations, please let us not fall to them.” This is similar to Jesus’ prayer in the garden “If it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” But just like Jesus, sometimes we will be led into temptation. Remembering that this is a collective prayer is crucially important here. How can we surround each other so that when any of us is facing temptation, they are not alone? At Alcoholics Anonymous everyone has a sponsor. Whenever you are facing temptation, you call your sponsor and they talk you through different options, arrange to meet you, or do whatever else you need in order to not give in to the temptation. And if you do give in, your sponsor and the meeting is always still open to coming back and owning how you were overcome by a power greater than yourself and how an even greater power brought you back here. How can we be such a community to each other?

Amen.