

The Lord's Prayer: 4) Asking God for What We Need

“Give us this day our daily bread”

Exodus 16:1-7, 13-16; Mark 6:34-44

February 27, 2005

A recent Roper poll found that nearly half of all Americans said that they pray or meditate every day—far more than those who regularly participate in religious services. Prayer has been called “the native language” of the soul—the universal expression of an innate human desire to make contact with the divine. The 16th century Christian mystic St. Teresa of Avila described prayer as “an intimate friendship, a frequent conversation held alone with the Beloved.”¹

This Lenten season we are immersing ourselves in the Lord’s Prayer. This prayer was taught by Jesus to his disciples in their native, everyday language. In doing so, he made a strong statement: this prayer was not just for the religious professionals of the temple, but for the ordinary people of the street. This prayer is for us.

The title “Lord’s Prayer” became familiar in England at the Reformation. Roman Catholics continue to call the prayer the “Our Father.” The English text used both by Catholics and Protestants was derived from a version imposed upon England by a 1541 ordinance of Henry VIII and employed in the 1549 and 1552 editions of the *Book of Common Prayer*. The church wanted a uniform English translation of the Latin version that could be learned and recited in unison by all.²

We have reflected upon the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, which are focused on God and the “needs of God.” God desires that God’s name be holy and that the image of God within every human life be respected. We pray that God’s kingdom come and God’s will be done, recognizing that God desires that which leads to the health and well-being of the common good. As we pray the first half of the prayer, we yield ourselves, our will, and our lives to God, God’s will, and God’s way. We offer ourselves as participants in the coming of God’s kingdom and the doing of God’s will.

The second half of the Lord’s Prayer focuses on the needs of humans. Humans have a basic need for food, and so we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Until the low carb craze, bread was symbolic of the daily sustenance our bodies need for survival. In both Greek and Hebrew the word for bread can mean any kind of food. In the Lord’s Prayer, it points toward those things necessary for human existence – what we need.

We learn something about our relationship with God from this phrase. We are dependent upon God for what we need. God is the source of the things we need to sustain physical life. We might think that God has far greater concerns than tending to our basic needs, but in teaching us to pray this way, Jesus lets us know that God is interested in the details of our lives. Just as parents long for their children to share the mundane details of their day at school, so God longs to hear from us the smallest matters of our lives.³ God delights in our dialogue and sharing.

The reading from Exodus reminds us of the time when God led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land. They traveled forty years through the barren and stark wilderness. They wondered how they could survive without food; it would take a miracle. But God gave them what they needed. It was called “manna.” Every morning when they rose it lay around them on the ground: small white flakes, like coriander seeds, that tasted like wafers made with honey. The people were to collect an omer of manna (about half a gallon) for each person for every day. They were warned to gather only what they needed each day and not to save up extra. If they collected more than was needed, it would rot. The one exception was the day before the Sabbath, when they could collect enough for the Sabbath as well, and it would not rot overnight. The manna became symbolic of their trust in God to supply what they needed each day.

In asking God for what we need, we can trust God to supply our needs and we need not be anxious about tomorrow. As my prayer life has deepened over the years, I’ve tried to be aware of the distinction between my needs and my desires, which are often very different. Our Church Administrator and I are both on call for jury duty this week. We were joking about whether we could pray to be released from jury duty. I recalled my sermon title, “Asking God for What We Need.” Being released from another obligation was something I wanted, but not necessarily something I needed. I thought I’d best practice what I was going to preach, so I haven’t prayed to be excused from jury duty!

Jesus encourages us to petition God for what we need. God desires to hear about the details of our lives. God delights in meeting our daily needs.

We noted from the beginning of the prayer that it is prayed as a community in the second person plural. So we pray “give us” and “our daily bread.” We are praying together and we are praying for more than ourselves. Jon Levenson, professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity School, notes that “when a Jew prays, he or she does it as a member of the

Jewish people, so many [prayers] are phrased in the first person plural.”⁴ As a Jew, it was natural for Jesus to teach his disciples to pray for the community.

Living for a day at a time keeps us interdependent. Think about the process whereby a slice of bread gets to our breakfast table as toast. Farmers plant wheat, harvest the wheat, and send it to the mill to be ground by the miller. The baker bakes the bread. It is packaged for distribution to a store. Truckers deliver the bread and clerks stock the shelves of the grocery store, where consumers find the bread and purchase it from the cashier. These days the food on our tables comes us to not from the gardens we have tended, but from vineyards in Chile, ranches in Argentina, coffee farms in Costa Rica, rice paddies in Asia, wheat fields in middle America, and vegetable farms in California. The creation of bread is a complex process involving both human and divine cooperation. “Embedded in this request for bread is an ethic which recognizes that for human need to be met, humanity must not only depend upon God’s cooperation, but also upon the cooperation of other human beings.”⁵ This is one reason we call it “our” bread.

Another reason we pray for “our” daily bread is that we have an obligation to see that all human beings have their basic needs met. When his disciples wanted to send away the hungry crowds to find something to eat, Jesus said, “You give them something to eat.” You recall that in praying for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done Jesus calls us to participate in making those realities. So too, here, while asking God to supply what we need, Jesus may be calling us to a way of living that shares what we are given so that the needs of all might be met. As Jesus offered solidarity with the poor, so the Body of Christ today is called to unite with the hungry and poor of the world. We are praying, in a sense, for an economic pattern that meets the needs of all people.

A more accurate translation of “daily” might be sufficient or enough. When manna was given in the wilderness, the Hebrews were allowed to gather only as much as they needed each day. To pray for more than we need would make us greedy, which is not a virtue in the reign of God. Most of us are fortunate in that we rarely need be concerned about how we will receive our daily bread or next meal. In our culture of over consumption, most of us ought to pray for the grace to be able to say, “Give us the grace to know when enough is enough” or “Help us to say, ‘No’ when the world entices us with so much.”

This petition raises the question of unanswered prayer. Despite our weekly or daily prayer for food, people around the world go hungry.

Perhaps it is because we have simply prayed this prayer by rote, saying “Give us our daily bread,” when we really mean “Give me my daily bread.” There is enough food on the planet to feed everyone; there is enough energy to keep all of us warm; there is enough to supply everyone’s basic needs – if we share our abundance. We may be God’s answer to someone’s prayer.

Consider the theologies of snack chip commercials.

A Ruffles potato chip ad shows two Inuits sitting in the midst of a vast, uninhabited, frozen wasteland. One is sublimely scarfing down his bag of Ruffles, while the other drools longingly in his direction. In reply to the request for a chip, the first man declares to his lone companion, “But if I gave one to you I would have to give one to everybody.” Then the Ruffles slogan: “So good you’d better get your own bag!”

Nacho Cheese Doritos employs comedian Jay Leno as their philosopher-spokesperson. After extolling the chips’ great flavor and radical crunch, Leno gives Doritos eaters free rein: “Crunch all you want ... we’ll make more!”⁶

Christian theology is not “get your own.” Rather it is “we’ll make more and we’ll share.” Give us our daily bread, enough to feed us all.

Jim Wallis tells about an old Pentecostal woman in his neighborhood in Washington D.C. named Mary Glover. “Mary was like a self-appointed missionary in our poor community, and she was a regular volunteer in our weekly food line. So poor that she too needed the bag of groceries passed out each week, Mary often said the prayer before we opened the doors each Saturday morning—simply because she was our best pray-er. Mary was one of those people who pray like they know to whom they’re talking. You got the sense that she’d been carrying on a running conversation with her Lord for a very long time.....

“The prayer was more or less the same each week....She’d usually start by saying something like, ‘Thank you, Lord, for waking us up this morning! Thank you, Lord, that our walls were not our grave and our bed was not our cooling board!’ Then she would always pray the same words, as a long line of people waited outside in the rain, cold and heat for a simple bag of groceries, a mere twenty blocks from the White House....Here’s what Mary Glover always prayed, ‘Lord, we know that you’ll be comin’ through this line today, so Lord, help us to treat you well.’”⁷

Mary Glover seems to know the essence of the prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread.” We ask God to be gracious to humanity through the gifts of wheat and favorable weather. We pray that God will empower human beings to cooperate with one another and share what is produced, so

that the image of God, the presence of Christ is honored in each and every one.

¹ *U.S. News & World Report*, December 20, 2004, pp. 53-54.

² Patricia D. Brown, *Paths to Prayer: Finding Your Own Way to the Presence of God* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), p. 49.

³ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), p. 181.

⁴ *U.S. News & World Report*, December 20, 2004, p. 60.

⁵ Michael Joseph Brown, "A Prayer for All People", *Sojourners*, July-August, 2000, p. 42.

⁶ *Homiletics Online*, retrieved February 26, 2005.

⁷ Jim Wallis, *God's Politics* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005), p. 217.

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