

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's readings, especially our first reading and our Gospel reading, are about prayer. Prayer has gotten kind of a bad rap recently. Maybe you've heard people complaining about "thoughts and prayers" offered in response to traumatic events, especially when those offering the thoughts and prayers don't seem interested in responding in any other way. And I have to say that these critics have a point. I'm sympathetic. If prayer is treated, for instance, as a substitute for meaningful action to prevent future tragedies, if the idea is to give the problem over to God without making taking difficult steps ourselves, without changing our attitudes and our priorities, then I'm inclined to agree with the criticism. Another way that prayer gets presented is as a way of getting what you want from God. And verses like those that appear in today's Gospel reading are used in support: "Ask and it will be given to you" and "everyone who asks receives." God wants to give you your heart's desire, the prosperity gospel preachers insist. All you have to do is ask God to give you the blessings that God is wanting to give you. But is that really what prayer is meant to be about? I hope to tease out an answer from our readings in the next few minutes.

Jesus prayed a lot. Today's Gospel reading is the sixth time that Jesus is mentioned as praying in Luke. And before this, the disciples are not mentioned as praying *with* Jesus. In fact, at one point (in chapter 5) the Pharisees come to Jesus' complaining that the disciples of John the Baptist and their own Pharisee disciples, pray and fast, but Jesus' disciples eat and drink. Why weren't Jesus's disciples praying and fasting? Jesus responded that it's not proper to ask a wedding party to refrain from eating and drinking. The suggestion is that Jesus' presence with his disciples was that kind of celebration, and that their conversations with him while he was still with them took the place of prayer. But in other places, Jesus did talk about prayer and fasting, and assumed that his disciples would do both. And it seems that this prayer was to be more than merely an ascetic discipline, more than a duty to be performed. It was to be a vital connection with God that brought about a transformation in the one praying.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus' disciples once again witness him praying. But this time, maybe with the Pharisees' observations still in mind, they ask Jesus to teach them how to pray "like John taught his disciples." Jesus responds with a version of what we now call The Lord's Prayer. This is one of two places the prayer appears in the Bible. The other is in Matthew, and it is Matthew's version that Christians have tended to use. It's Matthew's version that appears in our hymnal and in Luther's Catechisms. The version found here in Luke is much more concise. But it covers the same ground, and maybe it's important to say at this point that Jesus probably doesn't intend here to give the disciples a prayer to memorize and repeat. This is even clearer in Matthew, where Jesus says not "pray these words," but "pray in this way," and that's probably what is meant here in Luke as well. Jesus was giving them not a specific prayer to pray, but a template for organizing their prayer, as if to say, "hit these points as you pray." And that's just how Martin Luther treated the Lord's Prayer devotionally. We know this because Luther too was asked by his followers for advice on praying, and he told them what he did: he prayed through the catechism, using the ten commandments, the creed, and the Lord's Prayer each as outlines for his prayer. And this would take time, sometimes hours. Now I'm not saying that we shouldn't use the Lord's Prayer in our worship, or at the end of our meetings, or in our personal prayer – only that we should bear in mind that we're using the Cliff Notes' version.

I want to quickly now lift up three things in Jesus' template and the elaboration that follows that help to make prayer the transforming practice it is meant to be, and then see how they work together. First, Jesus' way of praying is direct and familiar. We are invited to pray to God as we would approach our parents. This is a point that is easily lost on us because we live in a culture of informality. This is not completely informal, though, and it is not without respect. The word here is "father," not "daddy" – which Jesus does use at other times. But it is approaching God with boldness, expecting that God wants to hear from us, and that God cares for us. The early church did not take this directness for granted the way we do, and they preceded the Lord's prayer in their worship with another prayer apologizing in advance for daring to be so bold, with words to this effect: "we would never dare to be so familiar, but Jesus told us to pray this way." Their sensibilities were more like those of Abraham in our first reading, who is very deferential and hesitant to get to the point. Jesus would have us cut to the chase, as it were.

Second, we are to pray persistently and with the expectation of results, that these important things that Jesus outlines are worth praying for, and God is both willing and able to answer our prayer. That doesn't mean that God is a magic genie who will give us whatever we want if we just say the right words, or that the answer to our prayer will be instantaneous. Jesus' advice to be persistent makes it clear that we can probably expect that God's answer to our prayer will *not* be instantaneous. The bigger point here is that God wants what is best for us and will ultimately give us those things that are good for us. Now I am painfully aware that even those good things we pray for, things that Jesus *tells* us to pray for, do not always come to pass on this side of the grave. Part of our persistence in prayer is the trust that because of Jesus, death will not have the final word.

Third, we are to pray for forgiveness, and with the expectation that God's forgiveness of our sins goes hand in hand with our forgiveness of others. This does not mean that God forgiving us is dependent upon our first forgiving others, although there are definitely some passages that give that impression. But if that were the case, I think we would really be in trouble, and in the bigger picture I think it's clear that our ability to forgive others has its source in God forgiving us.

These three components of Jesus' template work together to change us. Praying in the way that Jesus teaches has the effect of aligning our wills with God's, not so that we will do what God wants us to do, or so that behave as God wants us to behave, but so that we actually *want* what *God* wants and nobody *has* to police our behavior. This is what Jesus' call for repentance is all about, which goes hand in hand with God's coming kingdom in Jesus. A colleague of mine recently proposed a different way of praying the Lord's Prayer that makes clear how this transformation actually comes about in our lives. Try praying it backwards. Start with "deliver us from evil." (The "thine is the kingdom" part is a later addition.) That's where we tend to start naturally anyway. We are most often moved to prayer by crises that are beyond our control. "Deliver us! Save us!" we cry. Then comes a plea for forgiveness, for ourself and others, recognizing our part in the sin of the world. And then we turn to God for the necessities of life, our "daily bread." Finally, our forgiven hearts, sustained by God's persistent goodness, are opened to God's will as our good, and claiming God as our God and beloved parent. We won't be doing that with the Lord's Prayer in our service today. But I invite you to try praying it backwards and see how it opens your eyes and your heart to what God is doing in your life and in the world. May we trust that God is indeed at work through our prayer to transform our lives and open to us God's coming kingdom. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.