

Sermons at St. Paul's

A Wellspring of Spiritual Nourishment; A River of Service in Jesus' Name

July 25, 2010, Proper 12, the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Nancy Burton Dilliplane

In the name of God, Holy One, Holy Three, Amen.

When Carroll Sheppard preached three weeks ago, she suggested two ways for us to bid one another farewell. One was to identify how you—St. Paul's—and I have shown each other the straight and true plumb line of God's love. And so last week I preached about how—with Mary and Martha—you have shown me what it is to have my heart changed, and to do God's work in the world.

The second was for us to think about how we will pray for one another as we part company. And so how perfect that today's Gospel should be all about prayer. Because everything that I pray for you, the people of St. Paul's, Chestnut Hill, is summed up in the first line of today's reading from Luke: **Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray."**

My prayers for you are these: *May you be a people whose lives are shaped by prayer. And may others be so drawn to the kind of life that you live, that they would ask you to teach them to pray as well.*

I think that is precisely what is going on in Luke 11. There is just something about Jesus that captures people's attention. To use Godly Play language, "there once was someone who did such wonderful things and said such amazing things that people began to follow him." People saw something in Jesus that they wanted to have in their lives as well—something good and true and centered and whole and holy. It's why they followed him, it's why they listened to him teach, it's why they wanted to be with him, it's why they wanted to be like him.

And as they spent time with Jesus, they became aware that he prayed. A lot. I think that in today's Gospel, the disciples have finally made a connection—maybe part of the reason that Jesus is who he is has to do with his praying. And so finally they just have to ask him: Teach us to pray.

And Jesus takes them seriously. It's one of the few times in the gospels when the disciples ask him something that Jesus gives them a straightforward, immediate and concrete answer. Maybe it's because it's one of the few times in the gospels that the disciples get it right. Jesus is who he is because of prayer. When they ask Jesus to teach them to pray, they are really asking him to teach them who he is.

The disciples have uncovered an important truth: Prayer shapes who we are and who we become. When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, they are really asking him how to

shape their lives to become more like his. When they—when we—pray as Jesus prays, we become more and more like Jesus, because he himself was what he prayed.

And so Jesus his disciples to pray. He teaches them a prayer that will shape their lives as whole human beings, as God intended them to be. Martin Luther called the Lord's Prayer a summary of the Gospel. I think he is right. People who pray as Jesus taught open themselves up to right relationship with God, and right relationships with one another. First and foremost, prayer is about relationship.

The prayer that Jesus taught begins with the words "Our Father." *Our*. Before prayer is anything else, it is communal. We were created to be companions for one another. We are in this together. Being fully human means acknowledging that we belong to creation and are bound up with all of human kind. What happens to one of us, happens to all of us. We human creatures need to pray together. In prayer, "I" becomes "We" and "My" becomes "Our".

Nor are we orphaned in creation. "Abba, Father", Jesus teaches us to call God. It is the intimate address of a child to a parent. Jesus' prayer allows us to share his identity. We are people who have a father/child relationship with almighty God. We are made for intimate relationship with the Creator. We are children of a loving, caring parent.

And let me say a quick word here to those for whom the word Father does not have loving caring connotations. As surely as Jesus knows that there were and are abusive rulers who use their power to dominate and enslave, Jesus knows that there were and are fathers who abuse their parental relationship. I think Jesus' use of the word Father is meant to subvert violence and abusiveness, and to lift up love, compassion and care. Our Father. We beloved children. In prayer we claim the relationship we were created for.

But while created for relationship with God, we are not created for equality with God. When Jesus teaches the disciples to call God's name holy—hallowed—Jesus reminds us that we are finite creatures. God is the Creator, and we are creatures of the earth. In prayer we return to the truth that there is One who is ultimately greater, bigger, more powerful, more mysterious and more holy than we are. That One's name is Holy.

A wise friend of mine, Bob Anderson, recently retired from a long and successful legal career. He now spends his time as a counselor and companion in a hospice program. Bob leads one of the most prayer-shaped lives of anyone I've ever known. Recently I heard Bob say, "The older I get the more sure I am that there are two great truths. One, we are mortal—we are all going to die. And two, we are beloved. My job right now is simply to be present and to share in God's compassion." That's got the first part of Jesus' prayer pretty well, I think.

And so I pray for you—*May you be a people defined by your relationships—your relationship with every human being, and your relationship with God. May you live with compassion for all the human family, knowing that we are all going to die, and that we are all fiercely loved by the Creator in heaven.*

In the next part of his prayer, Jesus shares his conviction that what happens in creation, this earthly life, is important. Earth, as well as heaven, is the arena of God's providence. "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven." These words describe the life that Jesus led. He gave himself to doing God's will and enacting God's reign on earth—to restoring sight to the blind, healing the sick, forgiving sins and setting people free from whatever bound them. Jesus' was a life marked by trust that healing, wholeness, peace and justice are possible here and now, not just in the great by and by. The mortal life that we have now can be flooded with the same divine light and life that will one day be ours in heaven.

Jesus' prayer suggests that any one of us can step into God's kingdom at any time. That God's kingdom is any place where God's will is done. And so the kingdom of God exists not just in heaven, but here, on earth, anytime and anyplace any human being gives herself in trust to God, and acts in love towards others. And when two or more gather and beg for God's kingdom to come and align themselves with God's will—as families, as churches, as communions—the circle of God's kingdom grows on earth, as it does in heaven. God's kingdom erupts on earth each time love wins out over hate, peace over conflict, trust over fear, and whenever the other replaces the self as the object of first concern.

And so I pray for you: *May you be a people who sees God's kingdom breaking forth in the here and now, and works for and prays for the time when it will be everywhere.*

Next, Jesus prays, "Give us this day our daily bread." There is that word *our* again. The bread that we need to sustain our lives is for all of us. We can't pray for what we need for ourselves without praying it for each of our human brothers and sisters. Nor, if we pray this prayer seriously, can we have bread if others have none. Our prayer for bread calls us to be a Eucharistic people who understand God's kingdom as a great feast where all are included, from east and west and north and south. The petition for our bread brings us right back to human relationships again.

And we're back to God's ultimate power and holiness, too. It's God and not ourselves on whom we rely for our daily existence. Isn't it interesting that the next part of the prayer—the forgiveness of sins—is connected with the petition for daily bread? Give us our daily bread and forgive us our sins. Does this suggest that forgiveness is as necessary for our survival as food? And that our forgiveness of others is the primary need?

If sharing bread is part of right relationship with our neighbors, so is forgiving one another. Both are part of the equal relationship we are meant to have with one another. When we forgive the sins, or trespasses or debts of others against us, we relinquish the unequal power we hold over them. We set them free, and find in doing so that we are freed for new and equal relationships. We all need bread. We all need to forgive and be forgiven.

If one understands forgiveness to be of monetary debt, Jesus' prayer becomes a mandate to work for global economic parity, and to forgive the debt and other burdens that keep the poorest in poverty. If it is a debts owed to our person or honor or sense of justice, the prayer becomes a mandate to hold others harmless. Either way, by praying this prayer, we acknowledge that we are freed in our relationship with the Creator to the extent to which we free others in their

relationships with us. Jesus teaches his followers to ask God to extend mercy toward us in our sin precisely to the degree that we extend mercy toward others with our wealth and our power. Forgiving and being forgiven are as basic to our human lives as bread.

My prayer for you is this: *May you be a people who know the life sustaining power of forgiveness.*

Finally Jesus prays, “Lead us not into temptation.” The newer translation says “Save us from the time of trial.” Jesus acknowledges that temptation, testing and trials are part of the fabric of human lives. If there is anything that makes us human, it is our propensity to be tempted. To an extent, the whole of the biblical story is about the consequences of human temptation. Because he was human, even Jesus was tempted.

And so Jesus, who knew temptation so well, built into his prayer life a recognition of what it means to lead a fully human life—that we are tempted every day. This part of the prayer acknowledges that as humans we are always going to be tested, tempted, and tried. But at the same time, it trusts that we also have a loving and merciful God on our side to deliver us. In times of testing, we ask for grace to help us resist evil and to remember and cling to right relationships with God and with one another. And that brings us back to where we started. Relationships. Prayer is all about relationships. People who pray the way that Jesus taught open themselves up to right relationship with God, and right relationships with one another. First and foremost, prayer is about relationship.

So, may you be a people of prayer. And may your prayer shape your lives ever more closely to the One who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.