

## Wesley United Methodist Church

July 28, 2013

"When You Pray, Say: 'Father, ...'"

Luke 11:1-13

I want to begin with a true but incredible story. Back in September 1996 a man named Eduardo Sierra, a citizen of Spain, was on a business trip to Sweden. He was driving through the Swedish countryside when he came upon a Catholic church. He decided to stop in for a few minutes to say a prayer. The church was empty except for a coffin with a body lying at rest inside it. Eduardo decided to take a few moments to stop and pray for the man who lay in the coffin. Then he signed a book of remembrance left by the coffin. Apart from his signature, the book was empty.

Some weeks later, Eduardo received a phone call telling him that he was a millionaire. The body was that of a Swedish business man with no close relatives, who had left his fortune "to whoever prays for my soul first."

As we look at the Lord's prayer this morning, I wish I could tell you that you will receive the kind of return on your prayer that Eduardo received. That would be far better than the stock market. Pray for just a few minutes and become a millionaire. As you probably already have discovered, it really doesn't work that way. Unfortunately, often times, just the opposite is true.

Have you ever wished that God has a phone line and you could have a real conversation with him? Knowing that he is listening to you? Unfortunately, that is not the way it works either. At times we pray and it seems like no one is listening. We know it's not true, but that is how it seems.

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him. "Lord, teach us to pray, just like John taught his disciples."

The disciples were very much aware of what an important role prayer played in Jesus' life. The references to Jesus praying are numerous just within the Gospel of Luke. Jesus prayed at his baptism (Luke 3:21). He prayed during his temptation (Luke 5:16). On one occasion he prayed all night (Luke 6:12). On the day when he asked the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" he had been praying alone (Luke 9:18). Afterward he went up onto a mountain to pray (Luke 9:28). And now, on this occasion, Luke tells us, "He was praying in a certain place." Prayer was important to Jesus just as it ought to be to us. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."

The disciples saw how important prayer was to Jesus and so they asked him to teach them to pray. At that point Jesus taught them the most famous prayer ever prayed. Luke's version of the prayer is a little shorter than the Lord's Prayer that we use, but it gets right to the heart of what prayer ought to be. Here is what Jesus taught them.

"When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day, our daily bread. forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.'" Note that Jesus begins by focusing our attention on God. "When you pray, say: 'Father...'" This is important.

When we pray it is tempting to hop right in with our needs, our concerns. It is as if God is a peripheral player in our universe. Our focus is on the almighty me. That is the spirit of our times. Jesus began his prayer by focusing upon God. He began with "Father..." What a statement of faith that was, of course. Only Jesus would be bold enough to call the Creator of the universe Father. "Father, hallowed be your name..." That's an old word--"hallowed." A dictionary definition of hallowed would be "sanctified, consecrated, highly honored." Not only do we not

use the word hallowed anymore, very few things in our world are regarded as sanctified, consecrated or highly honored. Many of you remember when national institutions and flags were hallowed. Now it is almost impossible to even quiet some crowds while the national anthem is being played. We remember when the Sabbath was hallowed. Now it is the biggest shopping day of the week in many communities. Did you know that one of the offenses and arguments the Jews used to crucify Jesus was that he broke the Sabbath? There is something wrong in a society where nothing is hallowed.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Father, hallowed be your name..." He would have never referred to God as "the man upstairs." God is God. He is still "I am who I am."

This is what he says next: "Your kingdom come." When Christ refers to God's kingdom he is referring to any place God reigns in human affairs. Some of the ancient manuscripts like Matthew's gospel (6:10) include the words, "May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That is why we include those words when we pray the Lord's Prayer.

Here is another problem in our prayer time. We want to focus on our kingdom and our will. Jesus understands that. In the Garden of Gethsemane, remember how he prayed that the cup of suffering would be taken away from him. Nevertheless, when it came crunch time, he prayed, "Not my will, but yours be done."

We need to see that, if God's will is done, we will receive everything we need. "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness," said Jesus, "and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). Sometimes we do not see that because we do not see life from God's perspective. But God knows our needs and God will provide.

A boy once said to God, "I've been thinking, and I know what I want when I become a man." He proceeded to give God his list: to live in a big house with two Saint Bernards and a garden...to marry a blue-eyed, tall beautiful woman...to have three sons one a senator, one a scientist, and one a quarterback. He also wanted to be an adventurer who climbed tall mountains and drove a red Ferrari.

As it turned out, the boy hurt his knee one day while playing football. He no longer could climb trees, much less mountains. he married a beautiful and kind woman, who was short with brown eyes. Because of his business, he lived in a city apartment, not a big house with a garden, and he took cabs, and rode subways, not a sleek, expensive Ferrari. He had three loving daughters, not three sons, a nurse, an artist, and a music teacher. They adopted, not two St. Bernards, but a fluffy cat.

One morning the man awoke and remembered his boyhood dream. He became extremely depressed. He called out to God, "Remember when I was a boy and told you all the things I wanted? Why didn't you give me those things?" "I could have," said God, "but I wanted you happy." It is a wise person who realizes that the kindest thing God does for some of us is to not answer all of our prayers. When you pray, trust God. He knows your needs.

"Give us this day our daily bread." It's interesting how much Jesus had to say about our physical needs, only one line. That's all. Here again is why so much of our prayer life is ineffective. You and I probably spend most of our prayer time on physical things. Jesus devoted four times as much time on our spiritual needs.

This isn't to say that daily bread is unimportant. Jesus taught us to pray for it. God's will is for our physical needs to be met. How can we be effective servants if our daily physical needs aren't met? Give priority to His priorities, then he will provide the rest. "Give us this day our daily bread." Our physical needs are important. Take them to God.

"Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us." Wow! That is a hard one. Forgiving someone who has wronged us is tough. No matter how many blessings we have, if we still carry around anger and bitterness and resentment in our hearts because someone has wronged us, we are carrying a cancer in our soul. Forgiving others is one of the most therapeutic exercises in which we can engage.

Once in a small church, in a small town, toward the conclusion of the service, a trembling woman came forward and sat in the front pew, asking forgiveness. She had not been in that church for several years. The woman who sat directly behind her looked shocked. She grew pale and nervous. Several people in the congregation looked bewildered and wondered if trouble would start all over again. There had been trouble, lots of it, tragic and heartbreaking trouble. Two murders, court trials with opposing families, and one death in the electric chair.

The trembling woman was the mother of the murderer. The woman behind her...it was her husband and son who were killed. What would the second woman's reaction be? Would she be able to forgive? Fortunately she was able. She reached forward to the trembling woman, clasped her hand, and said, "I'm glad you have come back to be with us in the church." The woman whose husband and son were murdered later commented, "I feel better than I have felt in years. Now I feel free."

We don't forgive the other person for their sake, but for our own. It's easy to obtain God's forgiveness. If we repent, God will forgive. But forgiving ourselves and forgiving others, that's what is hard.

"And lead us not into temptation..." Well, maybe a little temptation. I mean, nobody likes a saint. We are sinners with infinite possibilities for good, but sinners still. All of us need to wash daily in God's cleansing waters. We really need God's help to escape the temptations that are forever with us. "Lead us not into temptation..." it is Matthew who adds, "But deliver us from evil..." You know he will deliver us from temptation if we ask, don't you? If we really want him to. Many of us, however, are quite happy to be tempted. If we want to be helped, we know the drill. All we need to do is focus on God's goodness and his love. Ask for our physical needs, but remember our spiritual needs as well, our need to forgive and our need to be kept from temptation.

"When you pray," said Jesus, pray like this: "Father hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation." It was the early church that added those last lines with which we complete the Lord's Prayer. "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever." Amen.