

Sermon
July 28, 2019
Proper 12C
The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD

Genesis 18.20-32
Psalm 138
Colossians 2.6-19
Luke 11.1-13

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. (Lk 11.5-8)

We'll begin this morning with a quiz, or, given the season, a straw poll. One commentator has suggested that one of the characters in the little story we just heard should be called "Mr. Pushy". The other one can be called "Mr. Sleepy". The quiz I have for you — and I'll ask you to raise your hands — is whether the story is more about Mr. Pushy or Mr. Sleepy? (And let me say, one answer isn't better than another—it's a parable, in some ways, and real parables aren't straightforward!)

So, how many think the story is about: Mr. Pushy? Mr. Sleepy? We're about [evenly split]. Hold that thought while I head down a different path!

One of the things that all Episcopal clergy—whether deacon, priest, or bishop—promise in their ordination ceremony is to be faithful in prayer. And, of course, it is implied as a responsibility for all Christians in our baptismal vows. Most of us clergy, however, assuming we attended an Episcopal seminary, became steeped in the rhythm of the Daily Office: that defined schedule of prayer services found in the first part of the *Book of Common Prayer*. When I was in seminary, every weekday we had Morning Prayer at 7:30am; and Evening Prayer at 5:00pm. We also had a mid-day Eucharist; if I recall it was at 11:00am. So, if we attended all of those services, we said the Lord's Prayer as a community three times a day. Many of us would also say Compline—the end-of-the-day prayers—sometimes with others, or by ourselves. That would mean the Lord's Prayer four times a day! And, if you look on pages 136-140 of the *Book of Common Prayer*,

you'll find "Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families" — four little "services" that you can easily pray throughout the day . . . again, the Lord's Prayer four times! I can't think of anything else I say that often!

The Lord's Prayer, or, as some traditions call it, the "Our Father", is one of the first "poems" (if you will) that many of us learned by heart. It becomes quite ingrained in us, so much so that if we were brought up, as I was, saying "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors", we continue automatically saying that, even when everyone else wants forgiveness for their "trespasses", or "sins" . . . and even if the words are written in the bulletin! And, I think, there's some awe-inspiring comfort in knowing that billions of people throughout the last two thousand years have prayed those words from memory—in their own language of course.

We have no way of knowing whether it was Jesus' intention that, in 2019, I would be saying those words three to five times a day! We really don't even know if Jesus expected that we would say those very words at all! Some scholars, for example, observe that Jesus' Jewish disciples already knew how to pray. They suggest that Jesus' answer to the disciple's request "teach us to pray" was meant to provide a framework for prayer, rather than a formula — that is, "These are the important categories to address". But the fact that the prayer made it into two Gospels—Luke and Matthew—although with some slight difference, shows that within a few decades after Jesus' death, it had become formulaic.

Early witness to its pervasiveness, however, was not limited to the Gospels. Towards the end of the first century (or perhaps in the first few years of the second), an unknown author put pen to paper—or quill to papyrus—and wrote what has become known as *The Didaché* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. The first half of the little booklet is mostly a moral treatise, distinguishing between living a godly life and living an ungodly life—and it's worth reading for those instructions. The second half turns to ritual matters, including baptism and the eucharist. And it is in Chapter 8 of the book that the text of the Lord's Prayer is found (including the doxology absent from Matthew and Luke), along with the instructions that it be said three times a day. So, clearly, from the earliest days, this prayer has been thought to be central to Christian practice.

But why? Why is this prayer so important to Christians? If you read it carefully, there's nothing particularly "Christian" about it. Indeed, one of my favorite commentators, a Jewish scholar of the New Testament, pointed out that she didn't have any problem reciting it daily in her public school as she was

growing up (these were the old days), because she didn't see it as anything but a Jewish prayer! But why do we Christians recite it so often? Why, according to *The Didaché*, are we supposed to repeat it three times a day?

To shed a little light on a possible answer, I want to return briefly to my seminary experience. [Oh, by the way, I haven't forgotten about the straw poll!] Seminary, at least for many clergy, was a time when patterns of life and thought became firmly established. I learned to "think" in Prayer Book language, because "It is right and a good and joyful thing to do". As I mentioned a bit earlier, it was a time of "formation" in the "Anglican Way". Indeed, Episcopalian seminarians who began their studies at non-Episcopal seminaries were often required to spend a year at an Episcopal seminary — laughingly referred to as "Anglican Finishing School". The idea behind all of that being that, to lead a congregation, the clergy-person needed to be firmly grounded in his/her tradition . . . to embody it without thinking. And, I will say that, for me — at least I hope — it worked; my religious "mother tongue" is Christianity, to be sure, but I have a significant Episcopalian dialect!

I think that something similar is implied, or even expected, by the repeated recitation of the Lord's Prayer. And here, I want to suggest that we often—perhaps through our almost automatic recitation of the prayer—externalize it. That is, we pray to the Father and expect, or hope, God might "do" the things that we request. For example, in the translation known as *The Message*, we ask God to "Reveal who you are." We want God to "Set the world right." And to "Keep us alive with three square meals" and "Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others." And finally to "Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil." In other words, the prayer is all about what we expect God to do for us.

But, what if, instead, the prayer is all about what God expects US to do? What if the three-to-five times a day recitation of the prayer is meant to form us as members of Christ's kingdom, just as one-to-three years of Episcopal seminary is meant to form clergy for service in the Episcopal Church? What if, as we recite the prayer over and over, what we are really saying is: "Father, we know it's our job to raise your name up, to honor it above all other concerns. It's our task to bring in your realm on earth, reflective of your realm in heaven. And that earthly reflection of a heavenly reality means that it's our responsibility to ensure that everyone has enough to eat. It's our challenge to forgive others with the same expansive graciousness with which you forgive us—yes, even that guy! And it is

up to us to ensure that others aren't tempted to fall away from the community, that that community is a safe place, a grace-filled place!"

In short, can the prayer be seen as a way for us continually to be formed, and re-formed, as members of God's kingdom? As we recite it—whether once a week, here, together, or five times a day—we commit to “Our Father” that we will be partners in an endeavor to make God's realm just as real on earth as it is in in heaven. As we know, doing that isn't easy. We are thrust up against opponents without—those, for example, who would dehumanize others because they are “different”, as well as opponents within—for example, our self-interest or desires. And, so the prayer is . . . yes, a petition. But, also, of course, something more; it is a yearning for an ideal, an oath of belonging.

Certainly, this “lesson” is about prayer, and there are lots of different kinds of prayer: praise, intercession, thanksgiving, etc. “Petition” — that is, asking God for something, for example, might be the most obvious description of Abraham's conversation, Abraham's prayer, with God about the fate of Sodom. Couple that story with the one about Mr. Pushy and Mr. Sleepy, and we could conclude that the lessons today teach us about persistence in prayer . . . that persistence will finally “win out”. But what I want to do is to propose another “kind” of prayer—that, through our very process of speaking to God, we are making a commitment, we are asking God to form us and our community in God's image.

Abraham humbly repeats over and over his request that mercy be shown to Sodom. We could say that, in his bargaining, Abraham is reminding God of God's quality of mercy. But Abraham is also learning that God will listen to reason and that, by extension, so should he. Just as we, reciting the Lord's Prayer over and over, are formed in the qualities, ideals and demands of Christian life and community.

So, now, back to the quiz: who's the story about, Mr. Pushy or Mr. Sleepy? If we read the lesson through the more traditional interpretation of Abraham's conversation with God, we will probably vote for Mr. Pushy . . . and that's okay! But, if we read the story in the context of the Lord's Prayer, especially if the Lord's Prayer is meant to form us as Christians, Mr. Sleepy might win the poll, because despite any discomfort he may've felt, he heeded the persistent call of the needy of his community, and he opened the door and provided bread. God's kingdom came to Mr. Pushy and his visitor that night.

Amen.