

“Give us this day”

Year C, Proper 12 – Luke 11:1-13

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, July 28, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

It's not often that the preacher gets the opportunity to preach on a piece of scripture that's used as part of every worship service. A couple of weeks ago, I talked about how much a part of our common consciousness the Parable of the Good Samaritan has become. Though I suspect that it is a bit less so for the man on the street, for those of us who are at least semi-regular in attendance at worship, the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples in this morning's Gospel lesson is even more firmly engrained way back in our brains.

Though this prayer is taught in a little different context in Matthew's Gospel, here in this morning's portion from Luke, the part of Jesus's model prayer that tells us that we should call on God for help, “Give us this day our daily bread,” seems to take center stage. As a matter of fact, Jesus goes on at some length to elaborate on the concept that God wants us to bring our needs to him. It seems clear that we are expected to ask God for what we need, for what we want, for what we hope for. Like the man who needed the loaves of bread from his neighbor, or like the child who wanted food from his father, Jesus tells us we are to make our requests known to God.

There's sometimes a kind of disdain for prayers of petition. In one of my favorite episodes of the old TV series *M*A*S*H*, a patient is brought in who believes himself to be Jesus Christ. Major Frank Burns, the somehow simultaneously lecherous and sanctimonious member of the crew, pronounces that he is sure that the man is not really who he says he is, because he has tested him with a prayer. Our hero, Hawkeye Pierce responds, “Don't be so narrow minded just because you didn't get chocolate pudding.” Frank tucks in what little chin he has, looks puzzled and asks, “How did you know what I asked for?” And Hawkeye answers, “Oh, Frank you always ask for chocolate pudding!”

As good “Mainline Protestants,” we tend to see prayers of petition as being pushy or forward, while prayers of thanksgiving or prayers of praise are somehow more “pure.” But let us be very clear on one point this morning: the ability to bring our desires to God is *fundamental* to the very *nature* of prayer. The confidence that God wants to hear our petitions, the trust that he listens to them, the *hope* that he will fulfill them, is what praying is all about. If you get right down to it, we can't even really pray at all, unless there is at least *some* element of expectation that God will do something for us. If we don't expect that God can and will provide us with something different, something *better* than what we already have, our lives would stagnate into a meaningless, undirected... nothingness. Without hope that things could and *should* be better, that *we* could and should be better, life would be impossible, and prayer would be pointless. Hope lies at the very foundation of our conversation with our Heavenly Father.

Even if we *are* a little embarrassed by prayers of petition, if we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we mostly pray when we are confronted with very immediate circumstances, when we encounter very tangible troubles, when we experience very concrete needs. When there is war, we pray for peace. When there is drought, we pray for rain. When we are headed off on a vacation, we pray that there *won't* be rain. When a dear friend is sick, we pray that she will recover. And when she dies, we pray for her eternal rest. Whatever dominates our thoughts, becomes the stuff of our prayers. Our concrete, tangible, immediate needs, desires and expectations become the basis of our petitions to God. We can hardly escape the inevitable fact that the myriad cares of our days, big and small, will find their way into our prayer life.

But these petitions can often be rendered *so* concrete and *so* immediate that our prayer becomes little more than a long list of demands. And there's a difference between *that* and the *hope* on which our prayer *should* be founded, the hope to which Jesus was pointing when he taught his disciples to pray,

“Give us this day our daily bread.” Our hope and trust become twisted into a kind of Santa Claus naïveté in which we pray wanting direct satisfaction of our specific wishes and desires. The focus becomes the gift rather than the giver.

You see, by clinging to the concrete, immediate circumstances of our present situation, we translate our desire to control our own future into the petitions of our prayers. Far from being true expressions of our hope, it is the very concreteness of these kind of petitions which effectively eliminates the possibility for true hope. This kind of prayer turns aside hope and trust. This kind of prayer tries to be certain about what is *uncertain*. This kind of prayer grabs at the bird in the hand rather than the two, or the ten, or the whole flock that our Father has waiting for us in the bush.

Being so eager to arrange our own future, we close ourselves off from the best that God has in store for us. And worse, when we approach prayer this way, and our specific requests are “not answered,” when don’t get our bowl of chocolate pudding, we find ourselves bound by frustration, twisted by disappointment, perhaps even mired in bitterness.

But when, with genuine *hope*, we pray “Give us this day our daily bread,” we avoid getting all tangled up with worries for how our needs and our desires might be fulfilled. When we pray with genuine hope, our prayers are not directed toward the gift for which we are asking, but toward the one who gives it. When we pray with genuine hope, our petition becomes a trust that the one who has provided for our salvation can and will provide for the rest of our future as well. Don’t get me wrong, our prayers may still contain just as many petitions. I know for a fact that mine do. But with the focus on the *giver* rather than the *gift*, our requests are not a question of having a wish come true, but expressions of our unlimited faith in the giver of *all* good things.

In this prayer of hope, there are no guarantees asked, no conditions posed, and no proofs demanded, only unlimited trust in our Father who fulfills all promises and who holds back nothing in sharing his goodness and his love for us. In this prayer of hope, we put our lives, past, present and future, into the hands of the Creator of all things. When we turn our prayers of petition inside out to focus on the giver rather than the gift, when we pray not merely with desire, but with true expectation, when we pray with the type of hope and trust with which a child asks her father for food when she is hungry, then God will *indeed* provide. Not only for our needs, but for what will give us strength, for what will give us peace, for what will give us joy, for what will fill our lives with love for him and for one another.

With such a hope as our foundation, fear and anxiety can be let go. With such a hope as our foundation, everything we are given can become a sign-post toward our Father’s unfailing promises. With such a hope as our foundation, we can move on to pray with joyful and thankful hearts, as our Lord has taught us, “Our Father who art in heaven, *Your* kingdom come.”

Amen.