

AMATEUR PRAYER
Sermon for Pentecost 10 – Lk 11:1-13
LPC, 7/28/13

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz? My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends. Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends. Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?

Let's face it, we've all prayed that way, haven't we? Never mind that we all know that's the *wrong* way to pray. We all know the *right* way to pray, right? Let's see a show of hands: who here knows The Right Way to pray? Everybody? ...Anybody?

Okay, you can stop being anxious. I didn't really expect to see a room full of waving hands. For one thing, we're Episcopalians. We *don't* raise our hands in church. For another thing, I'm just making a point. When it comes to prayer, we are all amateurs. None of us is a pro.

We may well ask, with Jesus' disciples, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Now, the disciples add, "...as John taught his disciples." At that time, as today, there were set prayers that everybody said. Certainly there were, and are, prayers in the Jewish tradition that everyone memorized and knew. In addition, rabbis like Jesus frequently taught their followers specific prayers. John the Baptist had taught his followers certain prayers, which brought them comfort and direction. People want the same comfort and direction from Jesus.

In Luke's version of this scene, Jesus gives the disciples both more and less than what they ask for. His prayer is simple and short and contains nothing you can't find in the ancient Psalms. But he also gives a picture of God that is infinitely more full and generous and loving and caring than either a fastidious deity who must be assuaged with The Perfect Prayer or a dispenser of luxury cars.

In the full excerpt we heard today, Luke emphasizes repeatedly that God is as at least as provident, generous, concerned and responsive as a doting human father. The parable of the importunate neighbor underlines this theme, and the teaching that follows makes it plainer still. How much stronger can one represent that God provides than to say: "Ask, and it will be given you"?

This is a problematic text, of course, for people who have asked and not gotten what they asked for. Or for people who have the literal request fulfilled but with an unforeseen result. I know of a family who prayed for their comatose loved one to survive a stroke, and he did, but in a vegetative state.

"Be careful what you pray for, you just might get it," is a lesson many of us take to heart so well that we demur from expressing our true wants and desires to God. Or we are so conscientious about avoiding a Mercedes Benz type of prayer that we expect nothing material from our prayers at all.

Well, as a wise person once said about prayer, when all else fails, follow the directions. And here they are, plain as day. Jesus says, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

You will notice that this is not the version we all know by heart and use in our liturgy. Matthew's Gospel, not Luke's, is where you find that stuff about "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That's not the only difference.

Many Christians assume that all the four Gospels agree, at least on significant matters. They do not. Christians who hold that the Bible is inerrant must try to harmonize the disagreements and explain them away. But I believe to elide the discrepancies is to do violence to the Scripture and mute its full testimony. The differences between the Gospels provide a quadrasonic picture, adding dimension and life to the narrative. I have never felt that accepting one account on its own means rejecting the other. But then, I'm one of those "squishy" Anglicans, and that's the way we think.

Anyway, the differences between Matthew and Luke's versions of the Lord's Prayer are instructive. Luke omits the "Our" from "Our father," and the street address, "in heaven." Matthew's emphasis is on corporate prayer and the transcendence of God, while Luke wants to emphasize the intimacy between the Father and the one praying: God's likeness to a loving human father. One does not address one's own father as "Our Father," but simply "Father."

Significantly, Luke does not make God's forgiveness of us dependent upon our forgiving others. Matthew's version may be more accurately translated, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." The word translated "as" is the Greek word $\omega\varsigma$ ($\hbar\sigma$) which indeed has a causative implication. Matthew then uses a past tense of the verb "forgiven." "We have forgiven."

By contrast, instead of $\omega\varsigma$ ($\hbar\sigma$), Luke uses the conjunction $\kappa\alpha\iota$ ($\kappa\epsilon$) which can mean just "and" or maybe just mark the beginning of a sentence. Luke also uses the present tense of the verb "forgive." So Luke's version can be translated: "Forgive our sins. We are forgiving those indebted to us." Luke's version recognizes the process of human attempts to forgive. It's a more generous interpretation than Matthew's, because Luke's intent is to emphasize God's generosity. Matthew, meanwhile, places his version of the Lord's Prayer in the context of a portion of the Sermon on the Mount, where he is emphasizing the need for human beings to forgive each other, following God's example.

Is one right and the other wrong? Of course not. Of course we need to be told of the absolute necessity for human beings to forgive others, if we want to truly follow Jesus. But we also need to know of God's passionate, father-like concern for us. Remember that this story in Luke follows the story of Martha, who is worried and anxious about too many things. When we are worried and anxious, we need to hear that God will provide for us.

And hearing that, trusting in that provision, we pray. We may not get a Mercedes Benz, but we're not promised a Mercedes Benz. We are promised the very Spirit of God.

In the face of that, we are all amateurs. And remember, the word "amateur" ultimately means, "lover." There is no wrong way to pray.