

Teach Us to Pray – Based on Luke 11:1-13

Aspen Community UMC

July 29, 2007

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This is one of two places where we find the “The Lord’s Prayer” - this best known prayer in Christianity. There is a longer version in Matthew, that is, more as we know it. We don’t know which originated first, or if the version in Matthew was added to, or if Luke shortened what had been passed down in his resources. We could explore the scholarly discussion about its origins and composition. However, I think what is more important to us is that we be with the disciples today in asking, “Teach us to pray.”

“Teach us to pray.” The disciples say these words after Jesus has been in prayer. Not after Jesus was talking about or teaching about prayer, but after he was in prayer. They had observed him. We are told that Jesus would pray for hours at a time, sometimes all night long. It seems almost certain that he practiced a form of prayer or meditation similar to that of other spirit persons, be they Jewish as he was and trained in a mystical tradition, or from other far eastern, or even in Native American traditions, here in the Americas. This says to me that the depth of prayer which Jesus practiced begins with the simplicity of this prayer.

Most scholars will say that the New Testament was written first in Greek. But, there are good reasons to believe that the Aramaic text more accurately reflects the words which Jesus himself spoke. The prayer Jesus shared with his disciples would surely have been in Aramaic. This was the language of the people. And, this prayer would have been prayed by Aramaic-speaking Christians for a long, long time. What is so interesting about the Aramaic is that each word can evoke an entire family of images and nuances. So, it makes for a rich experience of prayer.

This prayer is at the heart of our spirituality. Yet, we have become so accustomed to prayers filled with words (verbal prayer) here in the west, that we often run through the words almost thoughtlessly. We tend to think more in terms of what words mean, more than what they may evoke. Yet, in the Jewish mystical tradition out of which Jesus came – even the sound or the way a word feels to us as we articulate it – is considered an act of creation itself. In Aramaic, even if we do not know the language, the sounds can have something for us.

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I want to invite you into The Lord's Prayer now. I will use some of the images, the words that come from the original language. We know that we only have a window into the world of the early speaker of these words. I invite you to gaze into this distant window and hear this prayer. Listen with your ears and your heart for what it may say to you – how it may draw you closer to Spirit - so alive in its speaker that that very aliveness finds itself in you and me. I have given you a transliteration of the Aramaic, for you to see, and for us to speak.

Here is the prayer:

Abwoon d'bwashmaya (**Our father who art in heaven**) is an image of creation, of giving birth to the universe. *Abwoon* can indeed be translated as “father,” but it can equally be understood as the word for parenting (in either a physical or spiritual sense). It is also the image of the divine breath (spirit) flowing out of oneness, creating a diversity of forms. *D'bwashmaya* is about light, sound, and vibration spreading out and pervading all. In essence, then, “heaven” is not so much as place but a dimension of reality that is present everywhere.

The phrase has also been translated, “O source of radiance, dancing in and about all that is,” or “O creative breath ebbing and flowing through all forms.” These are just examples of the many possibilities that exist simultaneously in the original text. I wonder if it can give us new ways to think about God – to think about heaven. *Abwoon d'bwashmaya*.

Hallowed be thy name, or ***Nethquadash shmakh***, someone bending over to clear a space where the sacred may dwell. *Shmakh* is from the same root as the Aramaic word for “heaven” - meaning both name and the concrete manifestation of creative energy. The phrase could also be, “soften the ground of our being, and hallow a space for the planting of your presence,” or “free us from all constrictions, so that the current of your life may move in us without hindrance.” We are invited here to let go of all those things that keep God from entering our lives, to sweep clean the chamber of our hearts. Consider Jesus' symbolic clearing of the temple as you read this phrase. To what extent do you and I have marketplaces in our own beings? What clutters the space where God

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desires to dwell within us – all the noise of our minds. It is about learning to actively do nothing – something the Buddhists will call mindfulness.

We have made room for the sacred, and now **Thy kingdom come** *Teytey malkuthakh* - such a rich word. While normally translated as “kingdom” its roots are actually feminine. It conveys the idea of guiding principles that empower us to go forward in the face of all difficulties – in a way to be birthed into it. It’s about a creative potential ready to be realized. Think of the image of a blade of grass slowly breaking apart a piece of concrete. *Teytey* implies urgency in the coming of a vision waiting to be fulfilled. We could translate it is “Fill us with creativity, so that we may be empowered to bear the fruit of your vision.”

Nehwey tzevyanach aykanna d’bwashmaya aph b’arha (**Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven**) is the heart of Jesus’ prayer. The “will” referred to here is a deep desire causing my whole being to move toward a goal, with assurance that the effort will bear fruit. In some sense, it is living into a vision that is already there. “Earth” (*arha*) carries a strong feeling of solidity and support; it is something that is fully materialized. “I can do this.” The phrase could be: “Let each of our actions bear fruit according to your desire.” Or “Moving to the heart beat of your purpose, let us embody your compassion.” In essence, we pray that all we do be an act of co-creation with God.

Hawvlan lachma d’sunquanan yaomana (**Give us this day our daily bread**) asks, not only for bread in the physical sense, but also for all that we need to thrive. In Aramaic, the word for “bread” (*lachma*) is directly related to the word for “wisdom” (*hochma*). We are asking that it be brought forth from the very depths of our own selves – this wisdom. In sum, we pray: “Endow us with the wisdom to produce - and share what we need - to grow and flourish.” Or, it can be saying, “With passion and soul, let us generate from within that which is needed to sustain life this day.”

Washboqlan khaubayn (wakjhtahayn) aykanna daph khnan shbwoqan l’kjayyabayn (**And forgive us our debts as we forgive those who are in debt to us**) conveys the idea of untying the knots of past mistakes. To forgive is to return things to their state of original freedom. This is something described in the Old Testament in terms of the Jubilee year. In the Jubilee year all is

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returned to its original owners. We are called in this line to let go of all that holds us back from the fulfillment of God's desire. If our failures, our despair, our frustrations hold us back, we are asking for help in letting go of those things. A good translation is: "Untie the tangled threads of destiny which bind us, as we release others from the entanglement of past mistakes." Another might be, "Empty us of frustrated hopes and desires, as we restore others to a renewal of vision." This part of the prayer calls us as well to forgive debts in the economic sense. It is also the idea of letting go of those things that keep us from seeing, from the new vision. Forgiveness frees us up from being bound and stuck.

And, then we have *Wela tahlan l'nesyuna, ela patzan min bisha* (**And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil**), we pray that we not let ourselves be distracted from the purpose of our lives by things that are trivial. We ask that we not be seduced by superficiality and materialism.

In Aramaic, "evil" (*bisha*) is an action which is unripe, like a fruit that is either immature, or rotten. Perhaps it is like that perfect moment of productiveness - that we long for. This calls us to be sensitive to the moment at hand, to carry out our actions at the right time. We might say, "Do not let me be seduced by that which would divert me from my true purpose. To the contrary, illuminate, shine a light on, the opportunities of the present moment."

The final line brings together the whole prayer: *Metol dilakhie malkutha wahayla wateshbukhta l'ahlam almin, ameyn* (**For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever, amen.**) The word translated as "power" (*hayla*) is the energy that gives and sustains all life. "Glory" (*teshbukhta*) evokes the image of things returned to a state of harmony and equilibrium. The phrase could be rendered as: "For you are the ground of the fruitful vision, the birthing power, and the fulfillment, as all is gathered and made whole once again."¹

This is a very down to earth prayer – but a very profound one. It suggests a sense of "coming to be in God." This is "conversion." Not the kind of conversion where we think of a person

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converting to Christianity, or becoming a Christian, or converting to any kind of religious practice. That is an inadequate use of the term, Conversion is something that we enter into on a daily basis. Conversion is the ongoing process of “coming to be in God.” And, this prayer is all about “coming to be in God.”

Marcus Borg said that if we see God as “the one in whom we live and move and have our being,” it means that prayer is not addressing a distant being who may or may not be there, and who may or may not answer. Rather, it is more about seeing God as “right here” and “all around us” as one with whom we are already in relationship. It is the way we attend to our relationship with God.² Attending to our relationship with God – this is what we are doing in this prayer.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese theologian, in his book, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, writes that for the Buddha to be present in the Sangha (a Sangha is a group of persons in prayer), we must practice in a way that keeps his teachings alive, and not confined to sermons and scriptures. He says that the best way a Buddhist can keep the teachings of the Buddha alive is to live mindfully in the way the Buddha and his community lived.

For Christians, the way to make the Holy Spirit truly present in the church is to practice thoroughly what Jesus lived and taught. He goes on to say that it is not only true that Christians need Jesus, but that Jesus needs Christians for His energy to continue in this world.³ Again, this is about living into, attending to our relationship. This is how we Christians live into being Christian. This is what he taught us to do. Exploring this prayer, praying this prayer, in its fullness, is a way to practice some of what Jesus lived and taught. I invite you now to join me in this prayer – first using the sounds of the Aramaic, then a translation, and finally in the words which come to us in the New Testament.

¹ Hathaway, Mark. “The Aramaic Prayer of Jesus” as adapted from the work of Neil Douglas-Klotz in *Prayers of the Cosmos* (Harper and Row, 1990).

² Borg, Marcus. *The God We Never Knew*. p. 123

³ Thich Nhat Hahn. *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. p. 73

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An Aramaic transliteration of The Lord's Prayer

Abwoon d'bwashmaya

Nethquadash shmakh

Teytey malkuthakh

Nehwey tzevyanach aykanna d'bwashmaya aph b'arha

Hawvlan lachma d'sunquanan yaomana

Washboqlan khaubayn (wakjhtahayn) aykanna daph khnan shbwoqan l'kjayyabayn

Wela tahlan l'nesyuna, ela patzan min bisha

Metol dilakhie malkutha wahayla wateshbukhta l'ahlam almin, ameyn

An Aramaic version in English

O thou, the breath, the light of all,
Let this light create a heart-shrine within.
And your counsel rule 'til oneness guides all.
Your one desire then acts with ours,
As in all light, so in all forms.
Grant what we need, each day in bread and insight.
Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,
As we release the strands we hold of other's faults.
Don't let surface things delude us.
But keep us from unripe acts.
To you belongs the ruling mind,
The life that can act and so,
The song that beautifies all,
From age to age it renews.
In faith, I will to be true.⁵

The Lord's Prayer in English

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by 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 forever. Amen.

⁵ Hathaway