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The National Presbyterian Church

The Lord's Prayer: Staying True Through Thick and Thin

Matthew 4:1-11

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The story we heard so beautifully read in our scripture reading is what we might call the first story of Jesus' temptation in the gospels. Indeed the whole story of Jesus that follows from Matthew, Chapter 4, on toward Jesus' death is the story of one temptation or testing after the other.

- In the middle of the gospel, for example, in Matthew, Chapter 16, we have a strange unintended testing of Jesus *by a friend!* Jesus is speaking to his disciples and he's telling them that he is going to suffer and die. And Simon Peter, his best friend, turns around to Jesus and says, "No, no suffering for you." To which Jesus responds (16:23) by saying, "*Get behind me Satan*" – to his best friend he says this: "*get behind me Satan. You are a stumbling block to me for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*"
- And this testing of Jesus, determining whether he would be faithful to his course, goes all the way through to immediately before his crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane. While there is no mention of the Devil in Gethsemane, his 'finger-prints' are everywhere: in the garden Jesus is wrestling with the will of God and the pain and the suffering that is coming his way (and he knows it) in the next 24 hours, and, in resistance to the temptation, he determines through thick and thin to stay the course to the very end.

We'll come back to those stories in a minute. Let me remind you of what we're thinking about in our sermons just now. We are looking together at the subject of prayer: particular prayers that exist in the pages of scripture. As we move into the season of Lent, the weeks leading up to Easter, we'll look at a number of different prayers by a number of different people that have found their way into Holy Scripture. In January and so far in February we have been looking at only one of these prayers. And this prayer is the prayer that Jesus himself teaches his first followers and therefore teaches you and me: the Lord's Prayer. You can find it in the 6th Chapter of the gospel of Matthew.

This is a prayer – the Lord’s Prayer – that could just as easily be said by a Jewish person as by a Christian person. Jesus picks up on the great Jewish tradition of the Psalms as he teaches this prayer.

Go to the middle of the Bible, you find the book of Psalms and there are many songs there that are to be sung, many prayers that are to be spoken, written in poetic form.

And, like them, the Lord’s Prayer is in poetic form – at least to a Jewish person they would know this. Poetry in Judaism doesn’t rhyme, it’s repetition that counts as the ‘secret’ that it is a poem, and when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray he teaches them in poetic form.

- “Our Father Who art in Heaven.” How amazing is that that we can speak to God in heaven and expect God to hear? God wants to hear us. Prayer is God’s ‘social media.’ He opens the door for that kind of communication.
- “Our Father Who art in Heaven” – and then three lines are repeated with a slightly different theme in each: Hallowed be Thy name . . . Thy kingdom come . . . Thy will be done.

If you were to go to the original Greek you would see this far more clearly because the word order is repetitious, quite deliberately: May Thy name be hallowed . . . May Thy kingdom come . . . May Thy will be done. One right after the other.

Jesus clearly intended this prayer to be remembered and repeated. And so it has been for 2000 years by people like you and me in one church after the other, a prayer Jesus taught in poetic form to be remembered and we’ve done that. The trouble, though, with remembered prayers, repeated prayers, is that they become rote. We can say them. We can spit them out, but they can lose their meaning. ***So Jesus also intended that this prayer not only be remembered but that it be ‘thought about’; used as a model for all the other prayers that we pray.*** A prayer that we repeat and a prayer that functions as a model for all prayers whether they take this exact shape or form or not, to feed into the very soul and psyche of our being, so that whatever shape our prayers take they take in some sense this form.

So what have we learned as we’ve looked at this particular prayer ***as a model?***

1. Well I hope what we’ve learned and what we’ve seen so far is this: that the first task of prayer is *simply to get in touch with God*. Many people think of prayer as a way of getting something from God but that’s not Jesus’ view at all. The first thing is to be in touch with God, to be in communication with God as members of His family – with “Our Father Who art in Heaven” – there is this expectation that God hears us.
2. And then when we begin to ask things from God, the next thing that Jesus has in mind is that we use prayer *to re-center our lives on God* – to “tune our hearts” as one hymn puts it, “to sing God’s grace”; to put our heart back in tune with God because our lives get out of tune, out of kilter so easily. We move ourselves to the

center of life, when God is or ought to be at the center. And God says to us through Jesus “Re-center your life on Me. In prayer re-center your life on me” – *May the name that is hallowed be God’s, not mine. May the kingdom that comes be God’s, not mine. May the will that is done be God’s not mine.* Again and again, Lord, become and stay at the center of my very being.

Surely this is what Heaven is like? Heaven is that place where God is clearly seen to be God, clearly seen to be at the center, sits on the throne of everything and everyone and there is no challenger, there is no doubt. So we pray: may we know a taste of this now here on earth as in heaven. That’s how the prayer begins. Indeed the first half of the prayer is simply about connecting with God, re-centering, placing God at the very center of our being.

And only then does Jesus, in the three requests that follow, bring the prayer down to Earth, down to this level, bring it into the realm of our asking . . . and yet, once again, even then the asking is not for everything under the sun, but it’s “*Give us this day our daily bread*”: that is, give us enough for today, that’s all we ask. Sufficient for today. Not our latté, not our filet mignon, but the basics of life. Give us this day our daily bread. And when we have enough bread and more, we need to remember this request is not singular; that is, it’s not just me praying for ‘me and my’, it’s *us* praying for *ours*! Give *us*: who? all of us! Give all of us –which means *the whole world* to which Jesus came, and which he loves – daily bread. And use us to be vehicles of your grace in the lives of others.

We live in a world in which there isn’t enough daily bread for everyone; or, at least, if there’s enough, it does not get to the right mouths. Heaven is the place where there is always enough daily bread” So we’re praying: “*Lord help us to be Your agents in this world to bring as much Heaven down to Earth as possible so that all kinds of people can have what they basically need.*” Sometimes this will involve us in helping people who fall through the cracks. But for the most part this involves pursuing professions in life by which we build the society, the capability and the economy by which people are fed. This is a call to live all of our lives for the sake and the glory of God. Use me as an answer to this prayer.

So Jesus comes down to earth, and sends us out as his ambassadors to be the agents of God, to make earth like heaven. And part of that commission is to bring healing to relationships, to focus on restoring relationships that are broken. So we pray not only “*Give us this day our daily bread* “. . . but also, “*forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*”

- First, feed me, and help me feed others
- Then restore my broken relationship with You, Lord. I’m guilty, I know it. Help me to come back to You. Take away the guilt that stands between You and me.
- And, then, help me to do that for others. Help me to become like You.

One of the great verses in scripture is by the apostle Paul who says in 2 Corinthians 5:19 that “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself,*

not counting our trespasses against us, and entrusting to us the ministry of reconciliation.” This is our calling – to forgive, but not just as an end in itself, but so that relationships that are broken between humans on earth, and between us and God in heaven can be restored.

This is how the prayer begins and how it moves toward its climax. But there’s something that I need to say before we actually look at that climax, at the last, the sixth request. What I need to say is this, that at this point in the prayer there some alarm bells beginning to ring in my mind, because things seem so neat and tidy; too neat and tidy, and life’s not like that! Here is this prayer of Jesus. It’s a set prayer. It’s a prayer to be memorized; it’s 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. *But life just isn’t that neat and it isn’t that tidy.* It doesn’t usually work out so easily.

And we see this especially when it comes to the fifth request: seeking to be forgiven and being forgiving with others. We can pray for this again and again, but it’s still hard to forgive! It’s still hard to mend those relationships and to be reconciled with others. And there are times in which I’m not sure that we can make it all the way to heaven down here on earth! The struggle is too deep, the relationships too messed up. There are matters in this life which are too perplexing to unravel, and I’d be the first to admit that there are some that I just don’t know how to deal with or resolve, even though this is my prayer.

One friend here in the church mentioned to me last Sunday that there are some relationships which if we try to mend them to be fully reconciled on earth will only drag us down. They’re toxic. And, without enormous care and savvy, we’ll end up worse than before. And our Reformed heritage reminds us that there will always be this toxic element here on earth until the end of time.

So, for example, there are people who go to jail, who’ve come out of gangs, who’ve come out of drugs, who’ve come out of some awful environment. They end up in the jail and some of them end up worse than before but some of them are healed, some of them are forgiven, some of them are forgiving. And the worst thing that could happen to some of them is to be released!! Released out of what has become a place of transformation and safety, into that old toxic environment where the chances of recidivism, of repeating old bad behaviors and going back into jail, are very high. It doesn’t always work out neatly.

So those bells are going off in my mind: the prayer seems so perfect – but what about the messiness of life in this imperfect world? And, to add to that, what about prayers that aren’t as perfect as this prayer?

Of course there times when we gather in worship when we pray our prayers neatly, all decent and in order, feeling very Presbyterian: “Our Father Who art in Heaven,” we pray! But aren’t there times when we’re praying in which we can’t pray like that? In fact, times when we want to scream at God and say, “Hey You! Lord! Whoever you are, life’s a mess. I don’t understand it. What’s going on here?”

Aren't there times when our prayers are not so much like the prayer of Jesus but more like this prayer, written about 30 years ago now by Ted Loder (*Guerillas of Grace*, p.69).

*'Are tears prayers, Lord? Are screams prayers, Lord, or groans, or sighs, or curses?
Can trembling hands be lifted to You, or clenched fists?*

Will You accept my prayers Lord?

My real prayers, rooted in the muck and mud and the rock of my life.

And not just my pretty cut-flower, gracefully arranged bouquet of words?

Will you accept me, Lord, as I really am, messed up mixture of glory and grime?'

The answer of course is "Yes, God will." And the purpose of the prayer that Jesus teaches is precisely for this reason. It's not just to be repeated as it is (though it is), but Jesus' intent is surely for the prayer to act as a model, to infiltrate all of our life, precisely when we live in the messiness of life, so that our prayers and our living will somehow, in some way or another, stay true to God, to Jesus' vision, through the thick and thin of life.

Jesus knows that the straightforward nature of His teaching is going to meet the real world and at that point it won't always be straightforward! At times it really will be murky and messy and muddy. He knows this, and he calls us to somehow take the straightforward and bring it to life in the midst of a world which is often crooked and filled with evil, leaving us at times in an almost unbearable struggle for good, in which we by no means are certain that we are going to win, but have every chance of losing.

So, not surprisingly, He teaches his disciples to conclude their prayer with a reminder of the battle, the messiness: "*Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil*" – an acknowledgment that

- there is a real battle in this world between good and evil.
- There is a real Devil in this world fighting against God
- There is a real possibility of losing our way in the mire

and our lives as Christians are caught in the middle of this – this is where we are to live, in this murky middle, where Jesus not only calls us to learn the prayer and to pray the prayer formally, but to take what we learn and somehow incorporate it into a world which is not so neat and tidy, where temptation and evil are real.

And Jesus does this himself! Jesus himself enters the battle, the same battle in which we ourselves are fighting. And our scripture reading points to this -- that Jesus knows where we are. He doesn't just speak to us as a theoretical teacher ('hang in there when the going gets tough') but as one who has faced the same experience (remember, "everywhere you go, everywhere you've been, everywhere you will travel in the future I've been there before you. Now keep faithful to me through thick and thin).

At the beginning of this sermon I mentioned to you that the testing of Jesus, the battle within his life, raged from the beginning of His ministry to the end.

- So we find Jesus tested and tempted in our Scripture reading in his early ministry, in Matthew 4.
- Going back just a few verses earlier, in Chapter 3 we find Jesus actually being baptized down by the Jordan River. There he has what we might call “a wonderful spiritual experience,” a “mountain top experience.” As he is being baptized, God breaks through the curtain of heaven and speaks to him and says, “*You are my beloved Son. With You I am well pleased.*” Now, would to God that we would hear such a voice as this! Maybe we say to ourselves: “Ah, if only I could hear God’s voice saying that with such assurance everything would be wonderful from that moment on. Everything would be wonderful. I just need that one miraculous assurance from God and everything would be great.” Well – that’s not how it worked out for Jesus! The mountain top ends immediately afterwards as we come to our passage of scripture, when the battle begins: tempted and being tested by the Devil. There is no escape from this murkiness even for Jesus. He is there in the midst of the battle fighting against evil in the wilderness.

The Devil knows that if he can throw Jesus off track at the beginning of His ministry he will make the rest of the ministry absolutely redundant and useless. If Jesus gives in just one time, then He cannot die for our sins as the sinless Lamb of God (John 1:29). Throw Jesus off God’s track for a split second and the Devil wins. So the battle follows.

- It’s a battle in which Jesus’ identity is questioned – are you really the Son of God? (Are *you* really a child of God)? And the battle for us often takes its place there too --
- It’s a battle for our attention: will you really listen to God’s voice revealed in Holy Scripture? Will you find God’s will within the pages of scripture in some other way? The battle we often are in takes place there.
- It’s a battle for the right path or the short path. Will you take a shortcut in life? At some point in life the temptation is so real, some shortcut for some justifiable ends by which you will actually cripple your usefulness to God.

This is what Jesus has to decide at this critical moment in his life. And Jesus responds to this in each case by saying “IT IS WRITTEN” -- shorthand for “it is written in the scriptures.” That is, God has spoken! Oh really? Has God really spoken? Well, that’s a temptation (to believe God does not speak) that goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. And Jesus says in effect, “Oh, yes, God has spoken, and this is the word I will listen to.”

So Jesus responds to this temptation. He wins this battle and the scripture tells us that the Devil leaves. Round One goes to Jesus, to rock-solid Jesus, unruffled Jesus, standing straight, as if he could immediately, after he’s brushed off the Devil, repeat the Lord’s Prayer and everything would be great. But take the story of temptation all the way to the end of Jesus’ life and even though we find that

Jesus is strong and victorious here, later on we see him becoming far more human.

The Final Temptation. And so when we get to Matthew Chapter 26, towards the end of the story, we meet Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, and there he is more like us in every respect. Tempted like us, he falls down on the ground in spiritual agony. It's within 24 hours of his death on the cross and he knows it. And though he has been faithful to God all the way through his ministry, following the path of service, obedient to God's word, not abusing the power he has been given – he now reaches this so human moment where the pain and the suffering of the cross confront him. It is about to happen. And there is no rote prayer that comes out of his mouth. Rather it's a cry to God! *"God take away the cup of suffering that I'm about to drink. If it's possible remove this cup from me."* Three times he says it. *"God: do it! Do it! Do it!"* No formal prayer; just a cry to God in the messiness of life. Not the immaculate unmovable divine Son of God, but a weak human being, needing to pray. And yet in his weakness he beats off the Devil. Even in this moment, he beats off the one who would make him ineffective, rendering useless his death as a death to remove your sins and mine. And he does this by repeating a phrase, three times: again and again and again. Do you remember what that phrase is? (Matt 26:39ff)

"If it's possible take this cup from me. Nevertheless not my will be done but Thine."

Does that last phrase ring any bells? Create any echoes? Know where that comes from? Yes – of course! It comes from the prayer that Jesus himself taught his disciples! It's in his own heart and in his own mind! So that even though he doesn't pray the prayer formally, it's those very words that emerge in the midst of the battle, in the midst of crisis, in the midst of the mess... through thick and thin.

*Our father who art in Heaven Hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, **Thy will be done** – ah, that's the line. That's the line; there in the depth of his being at the very moment when he cannot think about repeating the prayer as a formal rote prayer. In the very depth of his being He, like you and me, is able to pray the prayer which sends the Devil packing: It's Thy will, it's Thy will, it's THY will! My life is to be found in Thy will, in seeking the honor of Thy name, Thy glory, Thy kingdom. And the Devil leaves! Goes! In the murkiness of life a prayer emerges in a different form but, powerfully influenced by the set form.*

I don't know what battle you find yourselves in just now. Some people may say, 'Well, I don't really have much of a battle in my life at all.' (Which may be because the Devil's already won? No need for a battle if he's won the victory. Check that off and go his merry way). But for most of us there's a battle. There's a fight and we're caught in the midst of it. And while we may have some easy answers that we check off our list, there's always something else which is not so easy and it remains a struggle and we pray for it again and again and again.

The good news is this: that Jesus meets us at that point.

He says to us in peace time: learn your stuff. Remember my prayer. Know it in your head but also know what it means. Seek my kingdom first, my will first, repeatedly, until it becomes intuitive within our lives.

Know that my passion is to feed you and care for you and to send you out to care for this world.

Know that I'm passionate about your healing relationships with me, with God and with others.

Get these things right, and even though they remain a struggle, you will find more power to overcome evil than you can imagine and more power to become agents of heaven on earth than you can imagine.

True: there will be no full heaven on earth until the Devil is finally defeated and the end comes. Presbyterians are not utopians; but we do believe, and the scriptures teach, and Jesus calls us to believe that we can be channels of more grace, more heaven on earth than we can imagine. And for this in the midst of a world which is not always black and white, you and I have been called to pray.

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