

January 27, 2013
The National Presbyterian Church

The Lord's Prayer Provision: Wants and Needs

Exodus 16:1-4; John 6:25-35; Isaiah 58:10-12; Matthew 14:14

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Let me read a second passage of scripture, this time from the New Testament and the 14th Chapter of the gospel according to Saint Matthew beginning at Verse 14:

Jesus has been in a boat on the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel and we read this: When Jesus went ashore he saw a great crowd. There's a great hillside there and the crowd is on the hillside. And he had compassion for them and cured their sick. The other gospels tell us that he taught them all that day. And when it was evening the disciples came to him and said this is a deserted place and the hour is now late. Send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves. Jesus said to them, they need not go away. You give them something to eat. They replied we have nothing here but five loaves and two fish. And he said, bring them here to me. Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to Heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples and the disciples gave them to the crowds and all ate and were filled. And they took up what was left over, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men besides women and children.

In our sermons at the beginning of the year we are looking together at the topic of prayer. And our focus is on the prayer which Jesus taught his first followers – a prayer that we call the Lord's Prayer. As we move into the season of Lent, getting closer to Easter, we'll look at some other prayers that we have in the pages of scripture. But we begin with this prayer that Jesus taught his first followers, and longs to teach to you and me as well. You can find it in the pages of the Bible in the 6th Chapter of Matthew's gospel right in the middle of Jesus' most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount.

So far in the series we've looked at the first half of this prayer, fifty percent of the prayer, and what I've pointed out is this: that the whole of the first half of the

prayer is *not about us* but about God. If it is in any way about us, it's only indirectly: it's about God and who God is and *who we are in relationship to God*, who God wants us and calls us to be.

- And so we pray '*Our Father who art in heaven.*' This is who God is. Not a mere impersonal cosmic being, but our father, our parent; which means that we are children of God and we have this right to communicate and connect with God.
- '*Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.*' 'Honored' be thy name.
- '*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.*' Let earth become as much like heaven as it possibly can. Heaven where you, God, are at the center of things, seen to be at the center of things, may this happen as much as possible, NOW!

If I were to take those liturgical words that many of us have known since childhood and translate them into a more casual kind of a prayer I think I might translate them, paraphrase them, in this way:

God, actually not just God but "father," the one who gave me life, the one who created me, the one who through Jesus Christ redeems me; you're up in Heaven. You know everything. Please remember that I'm down here on Earth and I need some help down here on Earth. Would you come down to me? Would you be here where I am? To tell you the truth God, Father, I don't always do the things that you want. I push you off-center in my life. I'm more concerned at times about my name, my identity, finding who I am in life, than thinking about who you are in life. I'm looking for a place to belong, a community within which I will find myself and somebody to follow – a voice to listen to. And I don't always think about your kingdom, your realm and you as the voice I need to listen to above all others. And I've got plans and purposes for my life. Quite frankly I'd like to do some of them. And you have your will and I'm not quite sure how these go together. You know sometimes my mantra is like Frank Sinatra: I did it My Way. That's what I'd really like in life: to end up just doing it my way. But Lord, and here's the prayer, Lord, I actually know that this isn't right. I'm not quite sure how to solve it. But I know this isn't right.

- *So let me pray and ask that you really would be my father, that I would know that I'm your child,*
- *And that you really would be at the center of things down here on Earth with me as you are in Heaven.*
- *Let me be more concerned about you and your name and who you are, than about me; let me find my identity in finding my relationship with you.*
- *May I find my community of belonging in your kingdom under your sway, because that's where I'm going to be through all eternity – at home with you. May I find my home with your people right here and now.*
- *And may I come to know that your will is best for me no matter what it is or where it lies. That my understanding of this journey is not nearly as clear as your understanding of the journey. May I not ask simply that you hitch on to me, but that I hitch on to you and go where you want.*

That's what I think is going on in the first half of this prayer. And if this is a prayer that we pray repeatedly, and we need to because we keep pushing God off center, that will change everything, and it will change the kinds of things that we ask for from God, the kinds of things that we think we need and the things that we want. If this is our prayer constantly it will change our lives.

This is the starting place, but, according to Jesus, it's not all. Once we've prayed to be re-centered, and we keep on praying it again and again, Jesus brings us down to earth! Jesus is not concerned only for the great things in the world, but for the daily needs of life as well – all kinds of needs. So what do we pray?

“Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed by Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth (make earth as much like heaven as possible) as it is in heaven

. . . and then the prayer changes – half way through, it changes: Give us this day our daily bread. [Thy, Thy, Thy, and then it's us, it's down here]. Give us this day our daily bread. God is interested in, Jesus is interested in, the nitty-gritty of life where we live.

This is a prayer for God's provision of our needs. Not of all our wants but of our needs.

It's not a prayer, you'll notice, for daily cake. It is not a prayer for daily *latté*. It is not a prayer for *filet mignon*. It is not a prayer for Häagen-Dazs!

Now, when we mention ice cream, this all becomes very hard for me to think about!! One of the great “sacrifices” (kidding!) in coming to Washington D.C. was to find that I was in an area of the country that did not sell Blue Bell Ice Cream. Those of you who have lived in Texas and in other places know the joys of Blue Bell . . . and you can't get it here! There are times I'd like that to be my first prayer: Lord, I need this, and need it now! And we all have that prayer for something or another.

Jesus says this is a prayer for our basic needs . . . whether, and this is critical, whether these needs are spiritual or whether they are physical, because what we know of Jesus is that he blended the spiritual and the physical together.

In almost everything Jesus did you can see this combination of the physical and the spiritual. He did not treat people as if they were disembodied souls. He treated them as if they were physical beings with an eternal life that they could possibly have. Spirit and soul and body all wrapped up together. *Give us this day our daily bread.*

SPIRITUAL BREAD. Let's think about this request in both spiritual terms and in physical terms, and we'll begin with the spiritual thinking of Jesus about daily bread. Jesus' thinking in this particular way was quite explicit.

For example when Jesus is in the desert, in the wilderness being tempted by the devil at the beginning of his ministry (see Matthew Chapter 4), he has fasted for 40 days and the scripture says he was famished, he was hungry. And the devil comes to him and says “Take these stones, these rocks and turn them into bread.” And Jesus replies to the devil in the words of the book of Deuteronomy, he says, “*We do not live by bread alone but only by every*

word that proceeds from the mouth of God." In other words, the bread we need is not just physical, it's spiritual. And we need this on a daily basis.

Or think if you move on to the next chapter in Matthew's gospel, from Chapter 4 to Chapter 5, to a section we call the Beatitudes. Jesus says, *"Blessed (or happy) are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be satisfied."* Jesus takes the physical and brings out of it the spiritual significance.

In doing this, Jesus stands in the traditions of the great prophets like Amos (8:11) who looked at the world around about him and said, 'There is going to be a famine in this land, a famine, a lack of bread – and this famine will be spiritual: a famine of the word of God.'

So we need to be praying that God would feed not only our bodies but our souls. Jesus the scripture says (John 6:51), is "the bread of Heaven" – spiritual food that nourishes day after day after day.

Back in 1975 journalist Stan Wooding was stunned when he met Mother Theresa of Calcutta, this woman who was with people who were so poor physically, concentrating on their physical needs, stunned to find that she was also passionate about their spiritual needs: when people were dying, caring for spirit and body at the same time – body and spirit. This is what he says of that encounter (<http://www.assistnews.net/Stories/2012/s12090005.htm>):

As a young reporter I immediately warmed to this gentle woman who had seen more poverty than anyone I had ever met. Speaking in the floundering festering slum where she had made her simple home I was surprised to hear her express pity for the "poverty-stricken West." [DR: Don't know if you think of the West as poverty-stricken?] She said, *"The spiritual poverty of the Western world is much greater than the physical poverty of our people. You in the West have millions of people who suffer such terrible loneliness and emptiness. If you are unloved and unwanted these people are not hungry in the physical sense but they are in another way. They know they need something more than money, yet they don't know what it is. What they are missing, is a living relationship with God."*

That is, they are missing the first part of the Lord's Prayer: a Father in Heaven who cares for us; wants us to communicate with him, wants us to know that we will find our honor and our glory in being concerned about him and about his name and about his will; finding our home in his eternal kingdom.

So there is no doubt that Jesus wants us to pray as we pray this prayer, about our daily *spiritual food*: "Give us this day our daily bread." Do you pray this prayer daily? *"Lord I get knocked off-center so easily. Bring me back to the center and to the truth that You are God and that my life is to be found with Your life. Give me what I need to sustain me and nourish me in this: daily bread, spiritual bread."*

PHYSICAL BREAD. There's also no question that this is a prayer about *literal* bread, bread for the body, as well, and that Jesus was passionate about both the spiritual and about the physical – the two side by side. If he knew that we cannot live without spiritual bread he also knew that we cannot live without the physical bread as well – the two side by side.

Jesus knew the story of Exodus (16) that we read as our first scripture reading. The people of Israel escaped from misery, they're on the way to the Promised Land. They are in the middle of nowhere. They are in the wilderness. They think they have been abandoned by God and they are hungry. They are hungry spiritually but they are also hungry physically. And God hears their cry even when they are children at their worst. They scream at God. They are mad at God. *"Father help us! Do you not remember us?"* And God hears their prayer. And provides for them, with birds (quail) that fly in, and with a substance called "manna," there in the wilderness, God provides for them physically every day of their journey day by day. His instruction is simple: *"Don't be greedy just take enough for the day"* (16:21). This is where the phrase 'daily bread' comes from.

Jesus knew the Exodus story, but not only that, when Jesus knowing this story sees a crowd of people who are hungry spiritually and hungry physically he wants to feed them – spiritually and physically. He uses his divine power as our reading from Matthew 14 indicated, to feed them. *And he wants to do it not just by himself but with his followers, with his disciples, the people like you and me.*

Remember that scene? The crowd is there. They're on the hillside above the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has been helping them physically, healing them, helping them spiritually, teaching them. And it's a long day and at the end of the day they are hungry. And the disciples come to Jesus and say "send them away. This is not our business. Send them away. Let them go and find food for themselves." And Jesus says "No. No! This is your business. You feed them." At this they are absolutely shocked. They say "we can't do that. All we have are five loaves and two fish." And Jesus says "Don't focus on what you cannot do; focus on what you can do. Give those to me." And in his hands he takes the loaves and the fish and he multiplies them and that huge crowd is fed, physically. They've been fed spiritually all day long, but now they are fed physically. Jesus has compassion on them, and shares his compassion through his disciples. And surely God wants to use us too, to feed not only ourselves but others.

'Our' Daily Bread: Not Just 'My.' In fact when we think about this prayer and think about our lives, "give us this day our daily bread," isn't the truth that for us here today, for most of us, maybe not all of us, *we know where our daily bread is coming from?* And actually we know where tomorrow's daily bread is coming from too! And we may be able to see even far into the future: we know where our daily bread is coming from for a long time to come! Maybe when we pray this prayer we very quickly should remind ourselves that our provision comes from God, but then focus on something in the prayer that we so often miss: *that*

this prayer is not singular but plural. It's not just give 'me' this day 'my' daily bread, it's give 'us' this day 'our' daily bread. So who's the 'us'?

Don't you remember that's a question somebody asked Jesus on one occasion: who is my neighbor? Who is the 'us'? Well, says Jesus, the person in need is our neighbor.

So, to pray "Give us this day our daily bread" is to include the crowd (like the crowd on the hillside) around about us. Maybe this prayer is not just for me and you but for 'us' in the greater sense: the crowd that God looks down on every moment, seeing hungry people -- spiritually hungry and physically hungry as well.

I don't know if you know the statistics on hunger in our world or in our nation, but let me give you a few brief statistics.

In our world, it's estimated that two billion out of the six or seven billion people on the face of the earth are undernourished. That's a third of the population undernourished; one person dies every three seconds because of hunger-related issues. Let me count: one, two, three... and another person dies! And God sees this and is pained by this just as Jesus was pained when he saw the hungry crowd by the seashore in Galilee. God is pained by this hunger in a world in which ultimately there is an abundance.

And what about our own nation? The statistics for hunger in our own nation are worse than in any other of the top 25 developed nations except for Mexico. The department of agriculture estimated in 2011 (the most recent statistics I could find; <http://frac.org/reports-and-resources/hunger-and-poverty/>) that 15 percent of our population went hungry at some point in the year. Fifteen percent! – that's 45 million people; and among them at least four million children. And some of those children are so hungry that they will not develop in the right way. That lack of nourishment in early years, as we know, affects the way they grow and develop. This is a massive problem that we have to deal with, and my guess is that the Jesus who fed the crowd and knew the story of God's provision in the wilderness is pained at what he sees – but not to the point of paralysis! He looked for his disciples to help out! And surely he still does that, asking you and me what we are going to do, we who pray this prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread?"

So we're to pray not only about 'my' bread but about 'our' bread, 'their' bread as well. And then we're to act! Help Jesus out! But how?

In our congregation, as many of you know, we're involved in a program which helps feed other people. We're involved with a marvelous organization here in the District of Columbia called Martha's Table. Some of you have been involved in sandwich-making for Martha's Table here in our own congregation, downstairs in Stone Hall. Those sandwiches go to Martha's Table and then they go out on the streets through a program called 'McKenna's Wagon.' I've been on the delivery team one time and need to go again. What you need to know is that there are people waiting, waiting to receive that food; people who do not know where their daily bread is coming. And part of our calling and the way we

answer this prayer is to be involved in this as a vital ministry of our congregation, a ministry that we perhaps we can expand together.

Many of you know this, but most of you probably do not know that the congregation from which I came in South Carolina was heavily involved in helping people not only with spiritual food but with physical food. *[I can mention this because I actually had nothing to do with its success! I turned up long after the program was established and was operating well. In fact I really had very little to do with its daily operation, except to provide my encouragement, and be amazed at what was going on.]*

Back in 1977 First Presbyterian Church in Spartanburg decided to begin a feeding program. Fifteen volunteers gathered in the church kitchen and decided to feed 25 people a week. By the time I arrived as pastor in 2006, the “Mobile Meals” annual budget was two million dollars, using 150 volunteers a week, serving 1,500 meals a day: fifteen hundred meals a day! The church had bought a building, next door to the church when the church kitchen became too small; they renovated it and built a brand new kitchen, and then leased the building for a dollar a year to Mobile Meals, which had become an affiliated but independent non-profit corporation. Meals were delivered in an area that spanned a 30-mile radius, and the name of Jesus Christ was honored and glorified by what they did for all kinds of people. Now, as you know, South Carolina as a whole is a very Republican state. They decided that they would not take an ounce of government money. The financial support came from all the churches and many individuals in the community, bit by bit and day by day; and because there were no strings attached they also hired a chaplain, a full-time chaplain, so that when they went into homes and discovered spiritual needs, like Mother Theresa they could care for the body and the soul together.

Now I have no clue what God wants to do in our lives and our congregation in the days ahead. But I do know this: that we have the gifts and the talents, we have the loaves and the fishes in our congregation that we can offer to Jesus Christ and say,

“Lord Jesus, I’m not sure what you can do with these, but I know whether spiritually or physically you can feed more people than you can ever imagine. You’ve done it. You’ve done it often. You can do it again. Give us this day our daily bread; and not just me but us. And, please Lord, through us, bring as much heaven down to earth as possible.”

One of the great New Testament scholars of the past 20 or 30 years in my estimation is a Presbyterian minister called Dale Bruner who taught for many years at Whitworth College, University in Spokane, Washington. As he reflects on this particular request, this is what he writes thinking about how God could use us. He writes this (“The Churchbook: Matthew 1-12”), he says,

In the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer we pray for real bread for real people. Bread costs money, money requires work; work requires good government, good business and good labor. Thus when we pray for bread

we're praying at the same time for money, jobs, government, business, labor, good crops, good weather, roads, justice and for everything economic, political and social.

Wow! This covers pretty much everything we do!

Lord, whether it's in the church or my place of work, whether it's with my friends or in the community, how can you use me? How can you use us? Not only to help those who slip through the cracks but perhaps to build a world in which less people slip through the cracks.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, may God give us boldness to pray and to believe that more heaven can come down to earth through us than we could ever imagine.

May we be grateful to God for feeding us spiritually and physically every day being the source of our provision and the home within which we find ourselves.

And may we pray that God would use me, us, to bring daily bread to others -- in this world that God loves and to which he sent his son, in this world in which he provided for his ancient people traveling through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, in this world in which Jesus on a hillside fed a huge crowd of people spiritually and physically with the bread that they needed that day.

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