Number 6:22-24, Luke 11:1-4

“What to pray”

One of my favorite time of the week is at the end of our chapel time and all the kids and I gather in a circle and we hold hands, and we close our eyes and bow our heads and we pray together. It is such a precious moment and one that I have a picture of on tacked up on the wall behind me to remind me of how important it is to let the little ones come to our Savior in prayer. On the other end of the spectrum some time back I went to visit someone in the hospital who was not a member of our church and was in their last moments of life. The family was gathered around we stood in a circle and I held her hand, seemingly lifeless who hadn’t recognized the family in weeks and hadn’t had the energy, seemingly, to even open their eyes.

So I prayed and then did something that I don’t normally do in the hospital and launched into the Lord’s prayer. In the middle of the prayer I heard one of the family members gasp and then she said – Look, and I opened my eyes as I continued in the prayer and the patient, who hadn’t said anything to anyone in weeks, was mouthing the words along with everyone else. It was powerful. Not much had gotten through, but somehow that old familiar prayer had found a cord that resonated.

Welcome back to Lent as we look at the Spiritual Disciplines and specifically this is our second week at looking at the disciplines of prayer. Last week we saw how to pray and we underlined the importance of being by yourself so that your location doesn’t become a liability but rather an opportunity to connect with our living Gather who made us and loves us.

This week we are looking at another aspect of prayer which is what to pray. In both of our Scriptures that are very well known, we find prayers that are commanded by God to be prayers. So these two Scriptures could be the short answer to any question of what to pray. You want to know what you are supposed to pray, well, just say Number 6 and Luke 11. Let’s read our second Scripture.

**READ**

When Naomi was baptized we took her out West to Stacy’s home church which is Chapel Hill in Gig Harbor, WA. And after Pastor Mark baptized her he tried to say Numbers 6: but what came out was something along the lines of Naomi, may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord lift his face upon you and give you countenance…He knew he got it wrong, but her tried again, and got it wrong, and he tried again and got it wrong again until finally he looked at us and said: Naomi, God bless you!

He went on to say that every night he says this prayer that we read in Scripture to his kids by heart, and he had no idea how he mixed it up. The worship committee is wrapping up its analysis of both worship services and as we analyzed them and thought about them and looked at their content and their style. It all came about because of an innocent question about Peace on Earth and its repetition and was that really appropriate and what we want in worship. So we talked about repetition of anything and it was generally agreed that we should mix it up. So I said, now the doxology we will mix up as well…right? No, because, well, it’s different, like since 1555 different.

There is something about a routine act of worship that provides comfort and almost a fertile ground for God to be revealed in some of us. This Scripture in numbers is a very common Scripture. It is one that was used and continues to be used in synagogue worship as a benediction for the people as they left their Jewish house of worship. Within Christian worship you have known pastors who have used it for their benediction or part of the liturgy when a child is baptized.

Did you know that a cylinder was found that dates back to 600 BC and on it was inscribed the words of these verses that are called the priestly blessing. It is the oldest piece of Scripture that we have in existence. So this prayer has been understood as being important within the Jewish liturgy and now as a Christian family we have adopted it as our own.

If you look at the format of these verses in Hebrew you find that vs. 24 has 3 words, vs. 25 has 5 words and vs. 26 has 7 words. It is a carefully crafted and deliberate prayer. The Lord handed down this prayer to Moses, so the Scripture states, to pass on to Aaron so that the name of the Lord would be a part of the fabric of what it meant to be Israelite. This prayer served the purpose of bathing the Israelites with the Spirit of God.

Look at the content and God commands Moses to tell the priests to pray over the people a prayer for blessing, grace, and peace. This is not God giving a prayer for Moses to take by himself to his room to pray for himself, but rather it should be prayed over all of Israel.

Notice that God does not say just say whatever comes to you at the time, or just let the Spirit move you. No, the individual is very much removed from this and the people are given a prescriptive prayer that the priests will be praying over them. This is key, because what is our tendency in the 21st century? We shy from anything communally oriented because I’m an individual and I want or I desire certain things that are different from you so I have every right to demand a relationship with God that is unique and one of a kind and doesn’t follow the conventional cookie cutter.

That’s culture talking. I still embrace individuality. I still wear my slippers in public, and tie dye during premarital counseling. I like being unique and conformity speaks to me of oppression. But what we ought to pray was given to the Jews in specific words that we find in Scripture that aren’t really up there for any of us to mold into our wishes, because God’s wishes were written.

That takes us to a question that Jesus’ disciples ask of him which is hundreds if not thousands of years after the passing down of the Priestly blessing. We find ourselves in Scripture where it gives us what we call the Lord’s prayer. I have an Episcopalian friend who is a priest and once he told me: I know why you Presbyterians don’t say trespasses and trespassers but rather debts and debtors because all you think about is money.

Let’s set the context for the handing down of the Lord’s prayer. We find Jesus in a certain place praying and his disciples were there and they noticed it. Luke, more than any other Gospel, has Jesus in prayer. That continues, by the way, in his second work, who knows what it is? Acts of the Apostles where we find the early church community time after time in prayer and supplication and as a result they have one heart and one mind.

So Jesus sets the example for his disciples time after time in this Gospel and this is another occurrence. So after seeing him in prayer one of his disciples asks: Can you teach us how to pray. So, when you hear that the implication is what? If you need to teach someone how to do something it means that they aren’t doing it or they aren’t doing it well before then. We don’t know how to pray, so teach us how. We don’t know what to pray. In fact, I know that John has directly taught his disciples how to pray, but you haven’t taught us, we don’t know how to pray.

Jesus, the Scripture tells us, teaches them what to pray in these verses. This text treats prayer as a learned experience, not simply as a release of feeling. Discipline is clearly implied. I’ve heard people speaking with new Christians and teaching them how to pray and it goes something like this: speak to God from the bottom of your heart, as if he is your best friend and you just want to share everything with him. Jesus’ response to his disciples when they wanted to learn how to pray is this Lord’s prayer – when you pray, say, Father…

Say Father…, Jesus probably would have been speaking Aramaic so Abba would have been used at that time, which was very close to our familiar term daddy. Yesterday I took Bethany and a handful of their friends skiing at Alpine Mountain and this was the first time that she had ever gone downhill skiing. And she was really getting the hang of it. About the 3rd time up the bunny slope before we got off the chair lift there was one of her friends with her dad in front of us and I started talking with him as I got off the lift.

The next thing I heard was Dad, dad, dad, I forgot to get off, DAD!. I turned around to see my youngest child making the turn and heading down the mountain still on the chair lift. Fortunately there was an alert attendant and everything worked out, but in that moment of panic Bethany didn’t say Father, Father, oh my Father I think I have a problem. Father, she said DAD.

The translation we have here is dad, a much more personal approach which was unheard of in Jesus day. You just didn’t address God in any type of familiar term. A normal synagogue prayer sounded like this: “Lord God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob! God most High, Creator of heaven and earth! Our shield and the shield of our Father.” But Jesus changed all that. He encouraged his disciples, he encouraged us to speak to His Father as our Father. That’s what I use in my daily walk with the Lord…Father, it is prescribed, we are told to do so. Of course it is not Father to the exclusion of any other term or attribute that we have of God, but even that should be echoed in Scripture and should reflect a relationship that is intimate and yet reminds us of who we are and who we are not.

We can’t touch upon all the aspect of this prayer, there have been books written on it, but What to pray is given to us by Jesus here. Address God as your Father with love, compassion, and respect. When we pray forgive us our debts Luke here uses the term sin, forgive us our sins as we have already forgiven those who have sinned against us. We have a problem, did you hear that? So does that mean if we don’t do such a good job of forgiving other people is our forgiveness, so really is our eternal destiny in jeopardy? Most commentators say there isn’t a quid pro quo, but why would Jesus have us include this in the context of our prayers?

Maybe because he didn’t want us to think that our prayers are only about asking God for stuff and more about loving His presence and recognizing all that He has done and reminding us that we have a responsibility to do likewise. I do not believe that our salvation is based upon our work of forgiving others, but I do believe that God cares about it.

Have we ever prayed, thank you for sending your Son Jesus, Lord, and it really motivated me to speak to Jimmy Jo Bob

About the way I talked behind his back. Or, thank you Father for the love you have for me and I am really trying to love that girl in school that everyone else makes fun of. Or thank you Lord for giving me hope and confidence that I will be with you and thank you for the courage of being able to love and forgive my ex husband or ex wife who cheated on me.

Normally we don’t include that second part, but that has to be part of what we pray. You see God’s forgiveness cannot be expected if human forgiveness is withheld. What to pray. Just two aspects of it did we cover today in the Lord’s prayer. Make sure you address God as someone who intimately knows you and yet as Barth states, is totally other. And secondly we pray, the content has to contain an introspection and an inventory of how we are doing with all of it. May God bless us and keep us as we understand what to pray. Amen.