

Sermon Text for July 5, 2020

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

I Chronicles 4:9-10, Luke 11:1

“When you pray, say...”

One of the most powerful experience that you can have when you are in a church overseas, regardless of where it is, is when you hear all the people reciting together a prayer and you just know that they are saying the Lord’s Prayer in their own language. Regardless of where you find yourself in the world when it is time for the Lord’s prayer, whether you understand the language of the people where you find yourself, you know that the Lord’s prayer is being spoken. Happy birthday America! We live in a country where you can find a Russian speaking church in Ephrata, a Spanish speaking church in Lancaster, and many other languages in between and here we find ourselves on this birthday of our nation worshipping our God and addressing the most iconic prayer in history, the Lord’s prayer.

I have never preached on the Lord’s prayer before. But I have preached multiple times on prayer in general from behind this pulpit. In 2016 while we were in Romans I gave a 4 part sermon series on prayer in 2016 just from Romans 1:8-15, yes we spent a month on those verses and each week we looked at a different component to prayer. We spoke about John Calvin calling prayer the chief exercise of faith. We spoke about Kierkegaard who wrote “A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking, but he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that prayer is listening.” I have described prayer in the past as the umbilical cord that connects us with our loving God and without it we die. We have addressed prayer in the past and how vital prayer is to our life.

But I have never preached on the Lord’s Prayer. Today we begin and it will take us through World Communion Sunday on October 4. Is there ever a time or a place where we have heard ourselves ask the question, someone needs to teach me how to pray in this time and this place because there is so much happening around me and around us that I have no idea how to pray. What do I pray for? Justice, protection, peace, unity? All of those things are so sorely lacking and yet how do we pray in the midst of this confusion and in the midst of what has to be a bewildering time for all of us?

But beware because as we embark on this journey today what we are going to find is that Jesus is not just giving us a nice prayer that we can use so that if we are every anxious or unsure that we just say that prayer and then we will feel better, almost as a calming influence in our life. No, the Lord’s prayer demands a new way of life. So I feel like I almost have to include a

disclaimer today as we begin together especially since I know that we are kicking off the Presbytery wide Festival of Worship, if you are here today just to hear a nice sermon and then make your way through the day and the week without having to change too much, this sermon series is not for you.

You cannot understand this prayer's deeper meaning without being changed. If you are ready and open to alteration in your ways of thinking and acting, then fasten your seatbelt. Let's read.

READ SCRIPTURE

We begin today with a prayer that has developed somewhat of a cultic following especially within evangelical circles. It is popularly called the prayer of Jabez because, well, it is the prayer of Jabez. Let's turn to I Chronicles 4:9-10 and we find someone who was born privileged and someone who without a doubt was considered entitled because, as we read in vs.9 he was honored more than his brothers. We don't know why, we don't know if he did anything to deserve that honor except that he caused his mom a lot of pain his childbirth which is why he was called Jabez which means born in pain.

So if Jesus gives his disciples a way in which to pray, I guess we can say that we are using Jabez' prayer as a foil to how not to pray. For the most part we can consider ourselves as Jabez, we have put ourselves in a position in history where we have been privileged since birth. Our nation was built upon a system which gave us entitlements that others did not have. As a result it is good for us to see Jabez and what he prays for, he asks for 4 specific things: bless me, enlarge my border, keep your right hand upon me, protect me from hurt and harm. Jabez prays in a way that would ensure that he keeps his place of privilege and honor and all that he was given because of his position would not only be safely guarded, but that God would enlarge his borders, allow his advantages to increase over time.

We find ourselves in our nations history where we need to be praying, especially us, an anti-Jabez prayer. God turn the blessings that I have asked upon myself unto others. Diminish what I have so that those from whom I have taken over history would have more. Allow your right hand of justice to fall with mercy on those who have been incarcerated that has allowed us to benefit, do not keep me from hurt or harm at the expense of others.

Now that would be a more appropriate prayer as we instead of asking God to bless America as we find ourselves in a position of privilege we ask that God would forgive us for having one of the most violent and bloody cultures known in the world. I read on Friday the

speech that Frederick Douglas gave on the 4th of July. Look it up and I think it is a prayer that is based upon that type of historical reflection that our nation needs today.

But we are supposed to be focusing on the Lord's Prayer, let's get to that. Did your parents or did you ever put your kid to sleep with this prayer: Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my Soul to keep, If I should die before I 'wake, I pray the Lord my Soul to take. Now I now that some people are worried about what is called a cancel culture, but I'm sorry, who thought of that prayer, and for kids? If I should die before I wake? Who says that to their kids?

What we find about the Lord's prayer is that it makes you feel like you belong. And belonging leads to belief which influences your behavior. It is not by chance that one of our primary emphases during our time together has been to recreate and reestablish a culture of family where we see each other as brothers and sisters in Christ and that extends well beyond these walls. Because if you feel like you belong it is going to lead you to belief in Jesus Christ which will inevitably influence your behavior. It is all tied together.

I can't tell you how many times that I have walked into a hospital room, I'll never forget Anne who had just been in a horrific traffic accident and they had put her into a coma just so her body could recover and every day I went in to see her and held her hand and prayed the Lord's prayer with her and every day I could feel a little squeeze from her while the rest of her body was out. I can't tell you how many times that has happened that someone who has been non-responsive for days when we say the Lord's prayer together there is a tear or a hand squeeze which tells me: I belong, I belong.

Tertullian, a church father, called the Lord's Prayer a brief summary of the whole Gospel. Daniel Migliore a classmate of my father and a professor of mine at Princeton says this about the Lord's Prayer: When spoken from the depths of our own need and in solidarity with the poor of the earth whose voices have long been silent, the Lord's prayer proves to be a profoundly liberating prayer. Called to prayer, we are summoned not to passivity, but to activity, not to indifference about evil in and around us but to passion for justice, freedom, and peace in the whole creation.

In our Luke Scripture for today we find only one verse which sets up the prayer as it is written in the Bible. We find it in two places in the Bible, Luke and Matthew. Now, together after this Sunday we are going to be looking at the Matthew Scripture because it most closely represents the prayer as we say it on a weekly basis. Luke today gives us the context in which this prayer was given to Jesus' disciples. When we looked at prayer in the past we saw how

consistently prayer was a driving force in Jesus' spiritual practices. Jesus was always praying and he was always encouraging his disciples to pray with him, even when they didn't want to.

So here in vs.1 we see Jesus praying and when he is finished his disciples ask him, can you teach us how to pray just like John the Baptist taught his disciples how to pray. Notice, they don't say can you teach us how to pray like how you pray. John the Baptist was probably the charismatic Pentecostal side of the Jesus' family. We know he was eccentric and as the frozen chosen Presbyterians when we pray, you know, it feels a little different than when our Pentecostal brothers and sisters pray. Sometimes we have prayer envy, which is exactly what was going on with Jesus' disciples here. They had prayer envy, they saw stoic Jesus praying in a calm quiet and private way, and they see this Essene who just came back from spending some time on the dead sea and the energy and the enthusiasm that was a part of John's prayers, and they wanted some of that. I don't think the disciples were expecting the words of a prayer, but rather how do we pray more like John prays?

But Jesus teaches them a prayer that is not for the faint of heart. It is more about the content of our lives and the lives of those around us than it is about looking like we believe. It is more about a transformation in our lives than it is showing others how we deserve to be in a position of entitlement. It is less about making us as individuals or us as a nation great and more about lifting up the name of our God so that we can decrease as God increases.

So today, you are just getting an introduction to a prayer that our Savior told us: when you pray, say...and we will find that it is more about how we live with God and with each other, than it is about increasing what we already have. On this celebration of our independence from Great Britain, I pray that we will focus on our dependence on God who has shown us a different way. Amen.