

Cornel Barnett
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
September 5, 2010

Philippians 1:3-11; Psalm 20; Matthew 6:7-13
“Sermon Meditation on the Lord’s Prayer – Part 2”

Today is the second part of the meditation on the Lord’s Prayer. Last Sunday we reflected on the first half of the prayer as read in Matthew: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Today we will meditate on first two petitions of the second half of the prayer (the Methodist version): “Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive the trespasses against us.”

We will conclude the meditation on September 19. Next Sunday is Homecoming Sunday and I have planned a more appropriate sermon for the occasion. If you were not here last Sunday you can read the first part of the meditation on the church’s website.

We heard last week that the Lord’s Prayer is the oldest liturgical prayer in Christian history. In saying it we join the millions who have said it before us and we are the living spirituality of the prayer to those who follow us. We teach it to our children. And since it is the prayer given to us by Jesus, we join in his spirit as we join with each other, offering to God the prayer he taught us.

In saying the prayer, we also unite with Christians all over the world. When Eugen, Maren, Mathis, Annette and Olaf say the Lord’s Prayer in German and we in English we know that the language of the prayer uniting us is deeper than the differences of speech that otherwise separate us.

The primary insights for this sermon come from Marjorie Suchocki’s book *In God’s Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer*. Suchocki teaches at the School of Theology at Claremont in Southern California, my other favorite seminary.

Our approach today is the same as last week: I shall read a line or two from the Lord’s Prayer, pause and repeat the reading and pause again for half a minute and then offer Suchocki’s thoughts on the line.

We begin:

Give us this day our daily bread. (x2)

[Silence]

This petition forms a request for our daily strength and nurturance. It indicates that our sustenance is not self-created and self-sustained, but is in fact dependent on God as well as many others in a relational world. Our sustenance comes to us, and we receive it, through many hands – and in an urbanized society, this is far more profound than in small farming communities.

The food on our table comes to us not from the gardens we have tended (although some might be), but from vineyards in Chile, ranches in Argentina, coffee farms in Costa Rica, rice paddies in Asia, wheat and corn fields in mid-America, and vegetable farms in California. The vast network of the world's food systems transports produce thousands of miles through a chain of industries, quickly making it available to us on our tables.

Give us this day our daily bread! As we lift this prayer for sustenance we cannot do so without gratitude to God's beneficence and earth's generosity.

To ask daily bread for ourselves is to ask daily bread for all, and to acknowledge our own responsibility in giving as well as receiving sustenance in this greater chain. The petition names "us" rather than "me," so that the faithful lifting of the prayer involves intercession for all the hungry of this earth.

Since the physical and the spiritual are intertwined, it is right to include the petition for spiritual sustenance in and through our petition for daily bread.

The great gift of Holy Communion – the Eucharist – is spiritual bread, given in remembrance of our Lord's last supper. In this supper, bread of earth and bread of heaven become one, and we are fed.

We receive through the physical form of bread the tangible witness of God's presence with us and for us in Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Eating this bread is participation in the event of Christ, and therefore is nourishment to our spirits... We who take this bread together become joined with each other and with Christ who is given for us.

The next petition:

And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive the trespasses against us. (x2)

[Silence]

If the petition for bread recognizes our interdependence, the petition for forgiveness does so even more. It assumes that in fact we will need to give and to receive forgiveness, that in our interdependent fragility we will in fact experience violation and inflict violation.

The petition does not say, "Forgive us if we trespass," or "Forgive us when we trespass," it simply states the fact: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." As a daily prayer, it assumes a daily need.

This is the one petition that attaches a condition to it: We ask God to forgive us as we forgive others. The prayer disallows our grudges; we are to forgive by releasing our ill-being and joining in God's own will toward well-being, even toward those who violate us. For we all have violated God, and God wills us well; the will toward well-being is at the heart of being conformed to God's own image and thus hallowing the divine name.

There is the further implication that as we release ill will toward others we open ourselves for God's own goodwill toward us. Harboring resentment and hatred closes us, causing us to become "stuck" in the event that creates our own ill-being. Releasing this, letting it go, opens us to a new future that begins with our own openness to God...It opens us to conformity with God's own great will toward inclusive well-being in the world.

Our Father in heaven, (our Parent in heaven), hallowed be your name. Your kingdom (your realm) come. Your 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 the trespasses against us...

...and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil – until we meet again and again. Amen.