

SERMON

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Prayer isn't easy to figure out. It's a regular practice of discipleship. We do it throughout worship and we develop strategies for making it a part of our daily schedule. Maybe it's something you do formally or maybe it's something you do on the go – intentionally, or when a moment of crisis hits.

Prayer has also taken on a bit of a negative connotation for some as it feels like an excuse to absolve someone from **doing** something. The phrase “thoughts and prayers” has become a platitude by some in response to problems they don't really want to solve...when others believe there is very real action to be done.

But what does it really mean to pray? What are we trying to do? Why is it so important?

Because prayer changes us – no matter how it's answered. Because prayer connects us to God and to this world we share. Because prayer reminds us who God is and whose we are.

The disciples see Jesus in prayer and ask him to teach them. They want to know **how** to pray. We don't know too much about the personal faith life of these disciples. We don't get much of their background story, other than to know where they lived and that they had been called to follow this rogue Jewish rabbi. There's nothing to suggest they *weren't* faithful Jews living in occupied Roman territory. As such, they would have had a history with prayer. Prayer was a part of the Jewish faith – there's a whole book of prayers... it's called the psalms. Prayer was a ritualistic part of daily life.

They knew **how** to pray. But they still wanted **Jesus** to teach them. They wanted to hear from him how to develop a connection to the God they worshipped, to the God they were following. Jesus does just that. No questions, no parables – yet – he simply gives them the words they are to use to pray to their Father in heaven.

If the purpose of prayer is to connect us to God, if the purpose of prayer is to change us as disciples, then this prayer matters because it gives us a framework for that relationship; it forms our prayer life, it forms *us* by showing us what matters.

In this particular telling of the story of Jesus, the prayer is the streamlined version. It comes with fewer words than Matthew's version. It doesn't have a bunch of the extra words that we've added to the prayer – not that there's anything wrong with those extra words, and some of our ancient manuscripts added them in to match Matthew's version

and perhaps the common prayer of the time. But this simpler version gives us the chance to focus, to pay close attention to what this prayer says about our relationship with God.

It starts with an introduction/summary. God, you are holy. Your kingdom come. **Your** kingdom. That really could be the end of the prayer. If we're focused on our relationship to God, then this is really all we need to say. We know what God's kingdom is. We know it's this reality of grace and love, and praying for that to come is probably all we really need to say.

But we're always willing to say more to understand more, so the prayer goes on to define what the coming of God's kingdom looks like...daily bread, forgiveness, and the absence of trial. Sustenance, reconciliation, salvation. No more hunger, no more debts, no more temptation. No matter what words you put to the framework, the message is clear – everything comes from God.

I took a look at Luther's Small Catechism to remind myself of what he wrote about this prayer. Luther included this prayer in that all-important brief summary of the faith, so it was obviously important. What struck me about Luther's writing is that he starts his explanation of the kingdom petition with, "In fact, God's good and gracious will comes about without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may *also come about in and among us.*"

In other words, God doesn't need us to pray to bring the kingdom into the world, but we pray so that we might realize our part in it. In fact, several of the petition explanations include this concept. We receive our daily bread from God whether we pray for it or not. God doesn't bring us to the time of trial, but we ask anyway so we recognize that we have been saved. We pray so that we are **formed** by these words. We pray so that we recognize what God is doing.

We don't pray just to say the words. That's a challenge for us in corporate worship. It's easy to let the routine of worship turn into practice without intention. It's easy to forget that there is a purpose to our words every time we say them. Our prayers are never performative; they are always about that connection we're developing and that change that comes in us through prayer. There are times when we might need to talk ourselves back into that connection, when we don't **feel** the words, but we say them anyway. And often, through that practice, we find our way back to God, to be re-formed by our act of prayer.

But the words themselves aren't the point. The words matter for how they point us to God. Our relationship with God is why we pray. Our trust in God is why we pray. We pray

within the framework Jesus gave us to help us see the coming of God's kingdom.

So, for a time, starting today, as we pray this prayer together in worship, we're going to focus not on the **routine** of praying together, but on the connection we're seeking, the structure of our faith that comes from this prayer. If you look ahead to the Lord's Prayer in the bulletin, you'll see a choice between two versions. I'm not picking one, **you're** picking one. We're not going to worry about a unison prayer of the same words; we're going to have a moment of communal prayer in which we each have the chance to remind ourselves of the kingdom, together.

If you learned the prayer in a language other than English, then feel free to say it in that language. I learned a variation of the "new" version of the Lord's prayer that uses "but" instead of "and" to acknowledge that we end up in the "time of trial" even though God doesn't lead us there. I know that some of you have an issue with the comma between "your will be done" and "on earth as in heaven". You don't need my permission to move the comma, but you have my encouragement, because there's a difference between, "your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" and "your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

In short, when we reach this prayer, we're going to make it a prayer, not a performance. We're going to focus on the truth of our relationship with God, rather than a choral rhythm. And if you want to take a little longer to say the prayer, then that's okay too.

Jesus taught us to pray so that we would see God's kingdom. Jesus taught us to realize what God's kingdom is in more than just words. Jesus taught us to ask so that we would know what it means to be the children of God that we are. God's kingdom comes, whether we ask for it or not; we are sustained, we are forgiven, we are saved. We pray not to receive that, but to know that it is true *deep in our being*; to know that God's name is holy and God's kingdom has come. Amen.