

Praying the Lord's Prayer in a Pandemic

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Lots of people who haven't prayed in a long time have been praying during these days: "Lord, give us a reliable vaccine...and a good logistical network for distribution...and a President who listens to science." You'd think Christ would say, "Good to hear from you. We've been out of touch for awhile." No, even the anguished, heartfelt cry isn't good enough for Jesus.¹

Paul says, "We don't know how to pray" (Romans 8:26), but not because Jesus didn't try to teach us. Lamenting the things Christians can't do in a pandemic – congregate, choral music, hugs – a pastor said to his people, "At least you can pray. Everybody can do that."

Not so fast. In an age in which "You'll be in my thoughts and prayers" is the equivalent of "Have a nice day," it's good to be reminded by Jesus that prayer in his name doesn't come naturally. Spilling your guts, enumerating your wounds, delivering your wish list: heck, even the Gentiles do that. The listening and the speaking required for colloquy with the Trinity is hard. Indoctrination is required. Fortunately, Jesus says, "When you pray, say...."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says it is a "dangerous error" to think that "the heart prays by itself."² "Prayer does not mean simply [to] pour out one's heart. It means rather *to find a way to God*," which doesn't come naturally and "cannot be done alone."³ "The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not poverty of our heart."⁴ Christian prayer is governed by the chief partner in divine-human communication.

Observing Jesus in prayer, his disciples asked, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). Say what you will about the ineptitude of these yokels, but in asking for instruction, they knew their incompetence.

In Matthew's account of this conversation, Jesus implies that the prayers of Gentiles (that is, all of us), prayers in the name of Venus, Mars, or Caesar are "a flood of empty words" (Matthew 6:7). The words with which we address God come only from the One whom we address.

Rather than trust the words that might come to them by their own devices, Jesus commanded his disciples,

Pray like this:
 Our Father who is in heaven,
 uphold the holiness of your name.
 Bring in your kingdom
so that your will is done on earth as it's done in heaven.
 Give us the bread we need for today.
 Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you,
 just as we also forgive those who have wronged us.
 And don't lead us into temptation,
 but rescue us from the evil one.
 (Matthew 6: 7-13, CEB)

Our. In insisting that we begin with “Our Father” rather than “My God,” Jesus coaxes us into intimate community with God and one another, confronting our self-centeredness and all-consuming self-interest and rebukes attempts to talk to God privately through soliloquy.

“We’re all in this together” was a slogan in the early days of the pandemic. Then came the statistics of the deaths from COVID-19 saying, “No we’re not.” A beleaguered public health official said, “Rather than appeal to people’s sense of the public good, we should have built on their look-out-for-number-one, survival-of-the-fittest instincts.”

Pastors like Robert Jeffress asserted that his church’s freedom to worship trumped (literally) responsibility to protect others, at the moment his county led the surge.⁵ The Constitution gives me the right to say “To hell with others I might infect.” The Christmas choir concert is defended as pious exercise of freedom of religion. As every pastor knows, illness (or the threat of it) tends to make narcissists of everybody. To pray “Our Father” is to take responsibility for someone other than friends and family, no small feat in a time when sickness engenders fear that accentuates self-concern.

By opening with “Our,” Jesus rescues us from our reduction of the Christian faith into the personal, subjective, and private and thrusts us (whether we like it or not) into the communal and ecclesial, making our prayer a means of loving our neighbor and of being dependent upon the prayer of our neighbor. As we move through Jesus’ prayer, we shall find that conversations with this God quickly become difficult. Better get some friends to back you up when you “pray like this.”

These months of isolation we’ve proved that Christianity is inextricably social, communal. Online worship is a pale imitation of the real thing, though we have found it helpful to tune into the services at the National Cathedral. You think I’d pray for Donald if not coerced by Anglicans?

Public prayer, joining our voice with those of the saints living and dead, helps us to pray more truthfully as we are corrected, held accountable to Scripture and the lives of the Saints. “Our,” when prayed in this pandemic, reminds us of our need for one another, of how tethered my life is to a whole host of planned route drivers, caregivers, and hospital workers who don’t even know me yet daily risk their lives for me.

Father. Jesus’ prayer opens not with assessment of our need but with address, acclamation. We are given a personal name whereby we can call upon God on a first name basis, “Abba,” calling God by the same name Jesus calls upon God.

The substance of the prayer is determined not by the crisis of a pandemic but by the attributes of the God we’ve got. We preachers have no special insight into the meaning of the pandemic; all we’ve got is the truth about God, a name above all other names, good news about the God who is. We are not abandoned to pray “Our federal government in whom we trust...,” or “Dear advanced medical technology which art our only salvation....”

Who is in heaven. God has not settled in down here nor is God the patron of those within our national boundaries. Reality is more than what we have in front of our eyes. The U.S.A. is neither the Kingdom of Heaven nor is the designation “Christian” the equivalent of a thinking, caring, progressive American. If God is in heaven and we’re not, it may be possible that God has larger concerns than our pandemic. Sometimes we can’t tell the difference between these competing realms until something

like a pandemic hits. Last January we were basically good people who were making postmillennial progress onward and upward. Then came the pandemic, along with the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and on and on, and the mask was ripped off.⁶ Nice try, everybody who wrote sappy articles on the salubriousness of isolation and the joys of sitting in solitude in the back yard, having time to play with the kids, and walking as a spiritual practice. Wait in line for three hours for a COVID test or a bag of groceries; then you may extol the joys of bourgeois pandemic solitude.

Though a pandemic is incapable of teaching us anything, the eyes of faith see a pandemic as an apocalyptic ending, a gruesome spectacle. The body counts on the nightly news, the countless deaths of family businesses. The United Methodist Church suffers financial calamity and the loss of hundreds of congregations, a virus accomplishing that which the breakaway WCA couldn't do through General Conference political maneuvering.

At the same time, this year has been an apocalyptic revealing of truth that we had heretofore ignored. United we are not nor are we in control. Black, brown lives matter less than white lives when it comes to health care and economic flourishing. The gap between the performance of my 401(k) and the hourly wage of a nurse has never been greater. Gratitude for first responders does not extend to foregoing Christmas with the relatives. Health care workers are expected heroically to rectify our dumb decisions and bad behavior.

If our human frailty and fragility has been unmasked, then we preachers do well to take note and to work that to our homiletical advantage. It's always advantageous to know the truth. What truth has been more feared or avoided by us than the truth of our mortality?

"In just a few weeks, that damn virus has destroyed lots of sermons that I preached last year," a preacher in Texas said to me; "I'm not proud of it, but I actually began 2020 with a series on 'How to Find Joy in Your Marriage.' By March, I was preaching 'You're Gonna Die; Deal with It.'"

In the first two months of 2020, our prayer was "Thank you Lord for enabling us to be competent and self-sufficient, backed up by the world's largest defense budget and a perking economy, the closest thing to heaven we'll ever know." By Lent we prayed, "God in heaven, come down and save us!"

Uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom so that your will is done on earth as it's done in heaven. Careful. Beware of praying for God to stir and defend God's name against counter-renditions of reality. To pray "Thy will be done" is to give God permission to go ahead and be as righteous and holy as God pleases. "Go ahead, Lord. Bring it on!"

Mention of "heaven" and "holiness" heightens the disparity between who we are and what God wants us to be and at the same time asserts God's will to bridge that gap, to effect God's will on earth as in heaven. God will not be trapped in heaven. We are not addressing some Unmoved Mover; we are asking for God's active agency. We are moved from gnostic views of heaven as some blissful eternal destination to Matthew's explicitly political Kingdom of Heaven. We are publicly pledging our allegiance, making a claim about power, reign, and sovereignty along with judgement, ending, and beginning. Before anything is asked from God or any assignment is given to us, the Lord's Prayer prays for God to go ahead and be God.

That raises a tricky question. Does God come in judgement or in mercy? Is God's

will done in the destruction of our economy, the bringing of our democracy into ill repute, the exposure of our historic racial divide? Or is God's will enacted in the faithfulness of the health care workers, the Black Lives Matter movement, and big pharma's invention of a vaccine? Since it's God's will being done, God's kingdom coming, we can't say for sure, can we? Are we at judgment or deliverance? Good Friday or Easter?

"Your kingdom come" is the Lord's Prayer at its most political, and many pastors are nervous about doing politics in church because of the contentious political divide in their congregations. Still, one of the reasons this pandemic has been so difficult to manage is that it has been so aggressively politicized. A mask becomes a pledge of allegiance.

Who devises the vaccine and who gets the vaccine are functions of how we've distributed power in the kingdoms of this world. Thus, before the Lord's Prayer moves to considerations of our collective mood or petitions related to human need, the prayer does politics: "Bring on your kingdom!"

"Last week you were just stocking groceries at Food Lion," preached one of my former students, Zoom-ing to his rural, Black congregation. "Now that COVID's come to town, your job has become your vocation, your chance to work with Jesus. If somebody thanks you for showing up on the front lines or asks you why you are doing it, you tell 'em Jesus sent you."

The politics of the Lord's Prayer confronts the American church's disastrous turn from kingdom concerns to inward, personal, individual problems. What God has in mind for our salvation is more than personal wellbeing. Whenever we hear truth preached, see a demon cast out, or somebody healed, Jesus says it's a sign that "the kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15). Implied in the petition for the coming kingdom is a hope that we'll be given the good sense to see it when it does. Then the challenge: will we join in and join up? "Thy will be done" is not a sigh of resignation; it's a war cry. We can't bring in the kingdom, but we can hitch on to God's kingdom coming.

There are those who look upon the pandemic and find reassurance in saying "God is in control." Yet the prayer's plea for the advent of the Kingdom is a reminder that we are not there yet. Not everything that happens is because God's will is done on earth as in heaven. We wait, trusting Jesus's promise, "I am working and my Father is working" (John 5:17). Many say, "Can't wait for the world to get back to normal," to which Christians, fed on Kingdom expectation, say, "God, I hope not."

Give us the bread we need for today. Plagues bring with them grief, fear, loss, trauma – none of which concern the Lord's Prayer. Not until we are halfway through the prayer is human need mentioned. Is fulfillment of human lack not the chief purpose of prayer in Jesus' name? Maybe Jesus' notion of our greatest need is different than ours? We crave freedom from anxiety, a sense of centeredness, or some other psycho-spiritual disposition. The first petition is for the bodily need of bread.

The pandemic, like any bodily illness, has reminded us that we are not the disembodied spiritual beings we wish we were. To pray "give us this day our daily bread" is to name our dependency. "Keep giving us our daily lives," we pray with borrowed breath. We are more contingent than we can admit until a pandemic comes along, or the Lord's Prayer is taught to us, and we are forced in spite of our evasions to admit that we're fragile and utterly needy of something so mundane and material as bread.

Note that we are to pray only for (sufficient, enough, essential) daily bread. We're praying for "our" daily bread, not mine. No bread nor health comes to us without the labor of strangers who are willing to care for us even though they are paid less than they ought.

Whereas in Matthew, "give us the bread we need" implies "give us the bread today that we'll need tomorrow," Luke seems to say "give us each day the bread we need for that day." Both have something to commend them in the Greek. My health is a relative, temporary, day-by-day contingency. Though I'm well today, eventually I shall not be, and that sickness shall, in one way or another, lead to my death.

The plea for daily bread in a pandemic can remind us that our new sense of vulnerability is the daily situation for millions. I'm on the board for a wonderful organization, Rise Against Hunger. The board struggled with how we could continue our work during this pandemic until a member reminded us: nearly a million people (mostly children) die every month for lack of bread, pandemic or not.

Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you, just as we also forgive those who have wronged us. Oh my. Augustine notes how, in his North African congregation, when people came to this petition in the Lord's Prayer, they fell silent. He praised them for at least having the guts to admit that they had no intention of being true to "As we also forgive those who..."

Gregory of Nyssa marvels that after the briefest mention of human want, and then only for our need for bread, the Lord's Prayer quickly returns to what God wants from us.⁷ Jesus teaches us to dare to ask God for forgiveness and then risk trying forgiveness ourselves. To say "as we forgive" is to claim human agency, empowerment. So much of the prayer asks for that which only God can do; now we are given an assignment.⁸

While Donald Trump is mentally ill and therefore is not fully to be blamed for his sin, professional ethics prompts me to call down the wrath of God upon Albert Mohler, Eric Metaxas, and Franklin Graham for their support *as Christians* of the rascal. Then along comes Jesus with his prayer. I'm hoping that "as we also forgive those who have wronged us" is a future participle.

In praying the Lord's Prayer, we're playing our bit parts in God's restoration project of the whole creation, otherwise known as the Kingdom of Heaven. God's Kingdom is coming to earth as it has come in Jesus. Do you want to be part of God's kingdom, power, and glory? Take matters into your hands. Perform a revolutionary act of resistance: Go forgive somebody.

And don't lead us into temptation, but rescue us from the evil one. Depictions of the Christian life as sitting serenely in your backyard during a pandemic and attending to the birds are sentimental denials of evil. Sentimentality tempts us into thinking that once we've sighed deeply and shed a tear, we've actually done something in response to evil. The pandemic has been a temptation to fall face down in a mire of self-deceit: "We've done everything right and taken all precautions, even at our well-deserved family Christmas gathering in Vail"; "I can't wear a mask for health reasons"; "We'll be stronger because of this."

Plagues and lies go together. Woodrow Wilson was not known as a liar, but he lied about the 1918 pandemic, and in so doing made it worse. In 1918, increased numbers of people turned toward religion — and got over it as soon as the pandemic ended. The nascent public health service strove heroically — and received death threats and

protests for their trouble.⁹ A pandemic in 1918 or 2020 is thus a wonderful opportunity to pray “Lead us not into temptation.”

The kingdoms of this world rarely give up power without a fight. When Jesus was alone in the wilderness, he was tempted; so are we. Lead us not into asking You to end the pandemic when we are unwilling to wear a mask. Preserve us from the temptation to pray, “Lord, please heal Rev. Jones from COVID,” even though we failed to pray three months ago, “Lord, please give Rev. Jones the strength to stand up to those in his congregation who are demanding in-person worship no matter what the Governor has ordered.”

Which leads us to the most striking thing to be learned by praying the Lord’s Prayer in a pandemic. The shock is not in what Christ tells us to pray for, but in what he doesn’t: *Throughout the Lord’s Prayer, there’s no mention of sickness or death.* There are petitions for bread, for the guts to forgive as we have been forgiven, and for deliverance from evil, but not for a good immune system.

In most of our churches, the weekly “Prayer List” contains nothing but petitions for healing from illness, recovery from medical procedures, and for salvation from the ravages of the predictable physical deterioration of older adults like me. Rarely is God’s healing help besought for anyone outside the congregation.

Prayer has become a last resort plea for God to fix the only thing we can’t – liberation from our bodies and uninterrupted continuance of our biological lives. Early Christians were once regarded as weird because they believed that death isn’t the worst that can happen to us.¹⁰ Judging from our prayers, fear of sickness and death is the sole motive for prayer.

As every pastor knows, people in pain, in extremis, can be, well, a pain. Fear does not bring out the best in us. When we – or someone we love – are sick, we find ourselves incapable of thinking beyond the present threats to the self. This natural human tendency becomes particularly debilitating in a self-absorbed culture where churches have colluded with the world by encouraging people to believe that “wellness” is the point of life, that it’s okay to have no other project than the well-being of ourselves and our families.

By teaching us what to pray for, Jesus disciplines our conversations with God so that we might learn to care for what God cares about, seeking first the Kingdom of Heaven rather than help propping up our bogus realms and false means of salvation. It’s the Lord’s Prayer, not ours, whereby the Lord makes room for us to think about something other than ourselves. For a few blessed moments we are free from being jerked around by a pitiless pandemic.

Taking time to “pray like this,” we thereby give the Lord time to wrench our lives out of the grip of the present moment. Christ outflanks the sovereignty that we might be tempted to bestow upon this virus. Given the long view, time taken out of the hands of the pandemic, and our current struggles set in the context of God’s ultimate purposes for God’s beloved creation, we are free, we can breathe.

More than banal reassurance that “We will get through this,” we are enabled to pray with conviction that God refuses to give up on us or on the world that God tenaciously loves. As the prayer acclaim, God is getting and finally will get what God wants. Only God is eternal. God will not allow this pandemic to determine the ultimate significance of our lives. God is more decisive than a plague. Christ binds the strong man (Matthew 12:29) and robs evil of its capacity to lord over us. No plague

determines the world's possibilities. Only God does that.

In being taught by Jesus to name our situation truthfully, our context is changed. The Lord's Prayer moves us from our quite understandable preoccupation with this deadly virus to a surprising acclamation of the rule of Christ. That changes how we live in the present moment. We can lift up our heads, having been given that which we knew not how to ask: "The assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

We used to cue our congregations for the Lord's Prayer with "Therefore we are bold to pray as we have been taught..." Maybe our problem is not that we have asked too much of God but that we have asked too little. Our intercession is for healing in this moment when Jesus taught us to go ahead and risk praying for the onslaught of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Christianity is not so much a set of beliefs that we must affirm. It is more nearly a prayer that we must learn, with the expectation that in praying this prayer, we shall become as we pray. Thus, memorization of this prayer is the essential survival skill for Christians.¹¹ It takes Jesus just a few minutes to teach us his prayer, but for most of us, it takes a lifetime to pray the Lord's Prayer by heart.

The self-deception, false hopes, anger, willful ignorance, economic injustice, public health crisis, and mortal fear people are experiencing are not peculiar to this pandemic. Thusly it was in 1918 and shall be in 2021. Yet this can be the greatest opportunity of our ministries for us preachers to rediscover our core identity and to exercise our unique calling by telling the truth about God and ourselves, egged on by Jesus.

"When you pray say...."

Notes

1 "Everybody prays whether he thinks of it as praying or not. The odd silence you fall into when something very beautiful is happening or something very good or very bad. The ah-h-h-h! that sometimes floats up out of you.... Whatever words or sounds you use for sighing over your own life. These are all prayers in their own way." Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological A,B,C* (San Francisco: Harper & Row), 1973, 79.

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970), 9.

3 Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*, 10.

4 Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*, 15.

5 Benjamin Fearnow, "'I'm Listening to God, Not the WHO': Pastor Robert Jeffress Rejects Holiday Restrictions," *Newsweek* (Newsweek, November 22, 2020), <https://www.newsweek.com/im-listening-god-not-who-pastor-robert-jeffress-rejects-holiday-restrictions-1549317>.

6 Lawrence Wright, "The Plague Year: The Mistakes and the Struggles Behind America's Corona Virus Tragedy," *The New Yorker*, December 28, 2020.

7 St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes*, trans. Hilda Graef, no 18 in *The Ancient Christian Writers*, London, Longman, 1954.

8 Origen asks why we inform God in prayer when God already knows what we need. Though God knows, God elects to work out God's purposes through our responsive words and deeds, including our prayers. When we pray, we join in God's action in the world by praying and doing what we can to be part of the working out of God's will for the world. When we pray this prayer, we're all priests. As we say out loud who's in charge, we become part of God's coaxing of the world toward God's intent. Origen, "On Prayer" quoted by Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 2014.

9 Nicholas A. Christakis, *Apollo's Arrow: The Profound and Enduring Impact of Coronavirus on the Way We Live* (Little, Brown Spark: New York, 2020).

10 "During one of the two plagues that early Christians faced (c. 250-60), Christians saw the plagues as

an opportunity for witness and ministry. In Alexandria, Bishop Dionysius reported that in the attempt to avoid the plague, pagans ‘would thrust away even those who were just beginning to become diseased,’ that they ‘fled from their loved ones....’ The Christians, by contrast, ‘visited the sick unprotected, assiduously serving them, tending them in Christ’ (letter cited in Eusebius, HE, 7.22). “‘In this manner,’ he continues, ‘the best of our brothers departed this life’” (cf. C. Kavin Rowe, *Christianity’s Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020], 73-75). Christians pray in a way that enables them not only to care for the sick but also as those who do not fear death because they pray in the name of one who has defeated death.

¹¹ William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord’s Prayer and the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 17.