



"Daily Bread"

a sermon by

Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

April 5, 2006

Matthew 6:5-15

Our reading for this afternoon comes to us from the book of Matthew 6:5-15. This comes as the theological and literal center of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which you may recall begins with the 'blesseds', then moves through a series of expressions about how the disciples are to live up not to the letter of the Hebrew law but to seek after the Spirit behind it. This text falls right into the middle of Christ's instruction. As with most of his lessons, it tells us a little about what we need for ourselves and a lot about God. So listen for God's word as it comes to us from Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount.

Last year I was invited to speak about prayer at a prayer partner banquet held here at the church where adults partner with youth and they pray for each other throughout the year. As I was preparing I reflected on the role of prayer in my own life, and specifically the Lord's prayer. I shared with the group that at one point pretty early on the prayer had become somewhat rote for me. I suspect that I may not have been the only one in the 1000 plus years that this prayer has been in circulation in the Christian church, but I suppose you could say that I had an instrumentalist approach to the prayer. I understood it as a magic formula for getting 'in' with God. Say this prayer and God's ears perk up and he becomes particularly interested in granting your petition. Of course, in the mind of a ten year old, that meant that I would pray this prayer as swiftly as possible so that I could be sure to stay awake long enough to get to the good stuff. Like waiting in line to give Santa your Christmas list when you know that the store is closing. So my prayer usually ended with, 'for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever and Lord please give me a pony and a pool. Amen.' No shame in my game. And so over time my understanding of the prayer changed. It became instructional as I struggled through difficult relationships, a source of comfort if not complacency as I prayed it at countless bedsides in the largely Catholic hospital I served as chaplain at. And finally it was redeemed in my mind as I connected in later years with its power to connect me with the larger community of faith throughout time that has whispered its lines both in times of urgency and in peace. But amazingly my understanding of it continues to evolve.

The Lord's prayer has perhaps become as comfortable as the meal that we will share together shortly. Words are recited and promises made. Prayers offered. Lord let your name be glorified. Let your will be done. Deliver us from evil. Forgive us as we forgive. Grant us daily bread. In it we lay the gamut of our need at God's feet and remind ourselves 'for thine is the power and the glory forever' just incase we'd started to forget that this wasn't actually all about us. And just when we thought that we could settle the books on our learning curve for this prayer that stands smack dab in the middle of Christ's longest sermon in the gospels, anchoring his entire message, when we read it in context we realize that there's a little twist to this prayer. One that Jesus adds to shape our understanding just prior to those familiar verses that begin with 'our Father'. Right after that line that we preachers tend to cringe at- the one about not filling up the atmosphere with your many words- its kind of an occupational hazard. But there it stands, "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him..." 'Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray...'

Does anyone else find this odd? Ok, Jesus, just to be clear, God knows what I need before I ask but you're telling me to ask in this way anyway. I'm sorry, but what exactly, then, is the point? Is it just prayer for prayer's sake, or is there true power in this petition? The conversation isn't so different, really, from the question of the sacramental meal before us. If God already knows our need then why do we ask? If God has already given us the grace, then why do we persist in breaking the bread? Is it really only to remember?

The story is told of the great revivalist, Charles Finney, who was a figurehead in a movement of church history known as the Second Great Awakening. Though he was trained as an attorney, Finney had a radical conversion experience as a young adult and became a Presbyterian minister, though he admitted to relying on his ability to present sound proofs and arguments to persuade his congregation jury of the cause for faith. In the late 1830's Finney became pastor of First Congregational Church in Oberlin, OH, arguably the largest congregation in the west at the time. One summer he and the rest of the region found themselves in the worst drought they had seen in years, a particular hardship for a farming community whose very lives depended on the ability of the soil to yield crops and feed livestock. After considerable prayer Finney woke up one sultry Sunday morning and decided that he would pray for rain.

When he came to church he climbed into the pulpit and began the service, and then proceeded to pray to God saying, to paraphrase, 'Lord we do not presume to tell you the ways that you should provide for us, but as a Father you invite your children to come to you with the desires of our hearts and so we come before you now. Lord we pray for rain. Our crops are dying. We cannot feed our cattle. Lord we ask you for rain and we ask for it now.' Finney went on even being so bold as to pray for rain by the end of service though there had not been a cloud in the sky when they had arrived or for weeks for that matter. He concluded his prayer and continued on with worship as usual. It was about halfway through the sermon when they heard the first low rumble of distant thunder. By the time he was finished preaching the first drops of rain had begun to fall heavily on the roof of the sanctuary and became more and more frequent. Before long the room was filled with the thunderous sound of water cascading down in sheets on the rooftop. And while tears streamed down the cheeks of the people in the pews Finney himself began to sing a hymn of thanksgiving to God while the congregation wept in wonder and in praise. But folks who were there would report that perhaps the most wondrous part of that day was that in the very front of the sanctuary leaning against the pulpit from the moment the congregation had filed in that morning was Finney's umbrella. As one scholar notes, it is one thing to pray for rain. It is quite another to bring your umbrella. ¹

If God already knows our need then why do we ask? If God has already given us the grace, then why do we persist in breaking the bread? 'Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray...' I think that one of the beautiful truths that these words of Jesus and the gospel of Matthew and the witness of Charles Finney and his umbrella are trying to tell us about the Lord's prayer or any prayer for that matter is that prayer is more than airing out our laundry list to one who already knows our need. It is an expression of

¹ This story was told by Dr. Garth Rosell, professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, to the students in his class, "Church History: The Reformation to the Present." It was recorded for Semlink Coursework.

faith and an act of worship. In prayer we create a rare and humble space within ourselves where we truly realize our need and realize that that need cannot be fulfilled by anything in this world. In prayer we state our own vulnerability and desperation and utter inability to do for ourselves and in so doing we glorify God. Not just because we acknowledge our need but because we ask.

For in the asking we state our dependency on the loving Father who knows how to give good gifts to his children and we honor him with our trust that he indeed gives them in his goodness and in his power. It gives glory to God to claim and proclaim him as the source of provision for all that we will ever need and so in prayer that honest confrontation with our need and that statement of faith in the one who will provide for it are together transformed into worship. That worship that is at the heart of the Sermon of the mount. and at the very center of our lives. Pray then in this way, Jesus says, draw near and worship the God whose name is holy. Whose kingdom we eagerly await and who empowers us to be signs of that kingdom by inviting us into his will. Who supplies us with daily bread that fills our hearts as well as our stomachs, and forgives us even as he strengthens us for the great task of forgiving. Whose power drives temptation from our minds and demons from our backs and whose kingdom will have no end. Who sees to it that it makes perfect sense that we should carry an umbrella in a drought.

Grace has been given to us already but we also break bread as an expression of faith and an act of worship. For recalling the 'celebration of the joyful feast of the kingdom of God' means recalling the depth of our need in the depravity of our sin that we could not hope to fill. Remembering that it is Jesus Christ who filled it and who invites us through simple words of prayer and a simple meal to come to the table and draw near to God in worship. So using the words Jesus taught us and the symbols that he gave let us draw near to the source and sustenance of our lives who offers and who is indeed our daily bread in more ways than we could ever imagine. Amen.