

Grace Episcopal Church Galena, Illinois  
July 24, 2016

Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell  
Text: Luke 11: 1-13

When I have long periods of time alone in the car, my mind wanders into various places. Sometimes, it is just mundane to-dos – the messy jumping from one unfinished task to another. Other times it is more prayerful – a series of snapshots, maybe, that march through my mind reminding me of people and places I have seen, memories that have come to represent those for whom I pray. I call them my memory snapshots, these moments that have the power to recall a place and a time, not only with the sights but with the sounds and the smells, the feelings of the sunlight and the breeze tickling the skin. The power to evoke emotions just as if I were living the scenes all over again.

Several come from a tiny Guatemalan village. It is a long, dusty ride from Guatemala City in a bright red bus loaded with people, baggage that may well include crates of chickens strapped on top. There is an orphanage here, originally for the children whose parents were disappeared during the years of civil war but now more likely for children whose families lack the means to raise them. The one hundred or so children live by age groups in cottages, cared for by “tias” or “aunties.” We, who stay in the convent with the Sisters of St. Francis who run the orphanage, eat our meals in the cottages sharing in the daily rations of the community.

The first snapshot is from early morning, before we begin our work. The shadow of the mountain looms in the distance, and the dew is still fresh. I sit along the dirt road that cuts through the village, watching as the women make their way to the mill. They are colorful in their Mayan skirts and embroidered blouses, large flat baskets of corn balanced on their heads. This day, in the cottages, we will eat tortillas made from the meal ground from this corn.

Give us today, our daily bread.

Another snapshot is of the orphanage’s courtyard where children laugh and play while the tias do the washing up. Whether dirty dishes or clothing, it is done by hand in large stone sinks. There is a system of soaking and scrubbing in the bin of gray water, saving limited amounts of the precious clean water for the final rinse. They are fortunate here – there is water pumped right to the village. But it’s available only a few hours a day, when the reservoir is high enough.

Give us this day, our daily bread.  
Give us water, and fill our basic human needs.

Others come from another trip some years later to Kenya. They are pictures of women and

girls with jugs and buckets on their heads, walking and walking to a source of water – sometimes hours each day. Often the trips take so long that there is no time for work or school. Then there are the jugs being filled from dirty ditches by the roadside or from Lake Victoria, one of the most polluted bodies of water anywhere. This water is not clean, not safe. So, there are other pictures of children who suffer terrible diseases because of that water – schistosomiasis, guinea worm, and other dreadful parasites.

Give us this day, our daily bread.  
Give us clean and safe water, and fill our basic human needs.

I wonder, as we read today's Gospel text, what the disciples were expecting when they asked Jesus to teach them to pray. They were, I imagine, already praying men – some had learned from John. But they had traveled with Jesus and seen for themselves how he went off and prayed – returning to do astounding things – gathering such crowds around him, restoring people to community, healing the sick and exorcising demons, and turning the law upside down, observing not the letter of the law, but its spirit. Perhaps the disciples wanted some of that and hoped for a formula – a bit of magic.

It's not so unlike our world today – our desire for prayer to have astounding results. Or at least a hunger for something deep and real. The desire to learn to pray seems to be true of those who go to church and those who don't. A look at the shelves of book stores or a search of amazon.com are an indication. Googling the word "prayer" brings 330 million links to information about the meaning of prayer, tradition, and about methods of prayer, and its outcomes, like its affect on healing. Praying with joy. Praying with singing. It seems to be a search for some certainty, some assurance in the midst of the fears and the trials of life. Maybe that explains the popularity of things like "The Secret" or the prosperity gospel that promise all manner of success and good things if you just get the formula right.

But, instead, the disciples – and we – got this brief little prayer. In Luke, it is a bare-bones version, missing the beautiful doxological ending that was added in the early church when this prayer began to be used liturgically. Missing some key phrases that are in what we recite together each week, "your will be done on earth as in heaven," "deliver us from evil." Missing the cadence and the expected musical setting. I wonder if hearing Luke's version of what we call the Lord's Prayer, makes us sit up and take notice. No doubt it is good to hear it this way, just in case the more familiar words sometimes become automatic when we recite them. Perhaps we hear the message in a new way.

It is an intimate prayer, addressed, "Father," bespeaking a relationship with a God who is near, who hears us rather than a distant and disinterested God who has left us to fend for ourselves. We name God's holiness, and in doing so, rightly praise God and offer ourselves as God's own, a people who make visible that holiness.

Though intimate, the prayer is anything but private. It is a communal prayer – for this parish that prays together, for Christians around the world praying these same words in many languages, indeed, for all of God's people in all places. We pray on behalf of these and

ourselves, and in doing so, acknowledge that we are not sufficient unto ourselves, but fully dependent on God as the source of all life.

It is a prayer deceptive in its simplicity – only three petitions. That we be given our daily bread, that our sins be forgiven, and that we be delivered from trial. Daily bread – just enough for our today’s needs – brings to mind the Israelites who received manna in the wilderness, but it was not to be saved or hoarded for the next day. Today if some don’t take more than their share, there will be enough for all. Praying this on behalf of all people helps us imagine – and hope for – a world where God’s kingdom is realized.

Daily bread is more than just bread, of course. It is all that is required for basic human life. Martin Luther, in his large catechism, had a long list: not just food, drink, shelter and clothing, but a kind spouse, good neighbors, peace and good weather, among other things. So, I feel justified in including water.

We continue to pray this prayer, Sunday after Sunday, day after day, even a world such as ours where the ancient code of hospitality is not practiced as in Jesus’ time. Where for many, a neighbor would respond to a late night request with anger and suspicion, maybe even fear. Where parents might give the child a scorpion or snake rather than an egg or a fish. Sometimes by giving too much – too many toys, too much food, causing obesity or encouraging materialism and self-interest. Sometimes through a lack of parenting – access to guns and drugs, neglect or abuse.

In this kind of world, how do we think about Jesus’ parable that tells us that those who ask receive, those who search find, and those who knock have the door opened to them? Jesus shows us a God whose nature it is to hear our prayers, who gives far more than the most loving of human parents give to our children. This is not a promise, of course, that every whim will be granted, every desire fulfilled. Matthew’s version has a lengthy discourse on how not to pray like hypocrites and how not to worry about your life and your body for God will make certain we have what we need. We are, however, to strive first for “the kingdom of God...and all these things shall be added unto you.” Luke’s version omits seeking first the Kingdom before we ask and search and knock. It is implicit in the prayer “your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in Heaven.” And we must read these parables in light of the prayer – that we ask and seek out of our great need for God and our longing for God’s kingdom.

In the face of really big problems, we need to remember that our worship life centers on this kind of prayer. We are shaped by our prayer – in community. I give thanks to the Rev. Joy Strom, pastor of Lakeview Presbyterian Church in Chicago for her commentary in the *Christian Century* a couple of years ago.

She reminds us that the common denominator in every house of Christian worship may be our belief that “God will bring a kingdom that is peaceful, that God will provide for our daily food, that God will forgive our unbelief and that God will shield us from trials we can’t handle.” The answers to the big things “come in the context of a community that is willing

to wager –no, willing to stake its life– on the belief that prayers are answered and that God does respond to human need and suffering. To stake your life on this claim means letting God have access to your own hands and feet when they are needed....Prayer is for the faithful who, empowered by the Spirit and supported in community, are willing to stake our lives on the belief that God will open the door when we knock.”

One final snapshot. It is a picture of the toothy grin on the face of an African child who has just taken a mouthful of pure, fresh water from a shiny spigot in the middle of the village. The result of a Church World Services project, “Water for All” that helps villages obtain and manage reliable water supplies. Water for thirst, water for health and hygiene, water for food production, water for peace, water to sustain the environment, water so that girls can go to school. Water for all of God’s people.

Give us today our daily bread, our pure, fresh water.  
Empower us with your Holy Spirit.  
Your kingdom come.

Amen.