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15

Matthew 6:5-

THE GREATEST PRAYER PART I: PRAY THEN IN THIS WAY

“The Lord's Prayer is Christianity's greatest prayer. It is also Christianity's strangest prayer. It is prayed by all Christians, but never mentions Christ. It is prayed in all churches, but never mentions church. It is prayed on all Sundays, but it never mentions Sunday.” That's how the former Catholic priest and current Jesus Seminar scholar, John Dominic Crossan, begins his book on the Lord's Prayer.

Crossan's point is that the singularly most prayed prayer in the Christian Church at-large, one almost universally used in services across denominational lines is surprisingly sparse, at least in the things that the church argues incessantly about. The Lord's Prayer is singularly devoid of any doctrinal debates, reactionary arguments or divisive rhetoric. It does not make any claim on what Christianity is, but who we are as human beings and who God is as the Divine. Crossan's book goes on to claim that this prayer stands as more than a strange prayerful anomaly in the annals of Christendom, but is, in fact, a revolutionary manifesto that dares to imagine a whole new kind of world that redefines justice, equality and love.

Now that might be a wholly different way to think of prayer than what you hold in your head. Manifesto is not a term I usually associate with my prayer life, but Crossan would argue differently. When we pray, we most typically are asking for something, what is commonly called a prayer of petition. But the Lord's Prayer is not really a prayer of petition per-se, because it requires things of us as well. Most petition prayers are uni-directional – we want God to bless us. Oh, maybe we offer to be really good in the future or promise that we won't ever drink that much again if only...but mostly our prayers of petition seem to be one way streets.

But this is not the only concept of prayer from our tradition. The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah spoke these words for God, “*This is what the LORD says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.'*” As the monastic communities developed in response to the marriage of church and empire under Constantine, the rule of the monks began to be formed. By the 7th century, a collection known as the Rule of St. Benedict guided many monastic communities and one of the primary rules was that worship, physical labor, just distribution of material possessions, non-violence and prayer were to be

part of daily life for “these then are the tools of the spiritual craft. When we have used them”, Benedict said, “without ceasing, day and night...our wages will be what the Lord has promised.” By the 14th century a book called “The Cloud of Unknowing” was written by a Christian mystic and supported the idea that one could achieve spiritual union with God through contemplative opening of the heart.

When I was in my teens, my parents took me to a Lakota Sioux sweat lodge ceremony out east of the city on some land that a family friend owned and let the traveling shaman use. I will say, first off, that being in a sweat lodge is undoubtedly the hottest I have ever been in my life – and I have hiked across deserts. But I also remember that before we went in, the shaman and a group of men sat around the fire that was heating the stones that would soon torture me so, and prayed. Now this was unlike any prayer that I had ever seen, because they chanted and followed a rhythmic drum beat that syncopated with all of their chants. I really don't know what they were saying, but I know what it felt like...it wasn't a petition, or even gratitude. They were not Christian, but practicing an ancient form of “spiritual union”...an acknowledgment of the presence of something bigger than them, something that they did not understand but felt fed by anyway. That's what is meant by prayer in the Christian tradition – a practice that engages us with something beyond us...finitude reaching for and engaging with infinity. It may include prayers of petition or gratitude, but there is something more.

Crossan speaks of prayer as empowerment. His metaphor is God as electricity. Being a much in demand speaker, Crossan travels a lot and, like many travelers, he comes with a laptop. The great quest in every airport is to find an available outlet to recharge your laptop. They are hard to find in airports. He even travels with a three way plug so that people can share any outlet discovered, like a communal meal. So for him this was a good image – God is electricity and we often need to recharge...some of us more frequently than others. Maybe some of us are Lithium-ion and others are old technology...or maybe we're stretching the metaphor too thin. Crossan sticks with this - God is like electricity in that it is always there, just not always easy to find. And God-as-electricity never demands that he connect, it is just there. We need electricity, it does not need us. Furthermore, he says, God-as-electricity is available to all comers, and works for both Apples and PCs.

Prayer is a way to tap into such electricity. But not, perhaps, in the manner that we are accustomed. Again I would maintain that we use prayer as a way to ask God for things, and Crossan would point out that this is also the main purpose that the Bible presents for prayer. The Psalms are a large collection of prayers in hymn form and they mostly take the outline of petitions. The phrases “give me life” and “give me understanding” are found in 10 different psalms. The Psalms often plead for God's action or register humanity's complaint of the lack of God's action. Either way, these psalms are petitions to God.

When they're not petitions, they are prayers of gratitude. Psalm 30 opens with, "Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name." Psalm 79 says, "We...will give thanks to you forever, from generation to generation we will recount your praise." Just like our concepts of prayer, the Bible presents two basic forms, neither of which make room for the kind of experiential prayer that I saw the shaman reflect or, I believe, the kind of prayer that the Lord's Prayer represents. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with prayers of petition or gratitude, just that there is, perhaps, yet another form...one that is represented in this radically revolutionary prayer

that we call the Lord's Prayer.

Jesus was not a priest, nor was he a pastor. Jesus was a prophet. And it is with the prophets that Crossan believes that we see a shift in the purpose of prayer. Most of the reasons behind this come from the character of God as revealed by the prophets. When we say, "we will recount your praise", what are we recounting? Why are we singing praises? The prophets would tell us because God is a God of justice and righteousness, two words that we have to examine a bit. Justice, in our everyday vernacular, is a term used in courts...it concerns the setting right of wrongdoing, the alleviation of a proven and verifiable injustice. But God's justice as seen by the prophets from Amos to Hosea to Isaiah to Micah and then to Jesus, is about distributive justice, not retributive justice.

Prophets always show up during turbulent times, and Jesus was no exception. They come in response to suffering and imbalance and they cry out for justice and righteousness, which does not mean moral superiority as much as it means integrity. God is just because God does what is right and God does what is right because God is just. This is the character of God, according to all of the prophets. The prophetic biblical tradition upholds the idea that God cares about distributive justice or, in other words, the concept of "enough". Do all of God's children have enough? Crossan says that the prophetic biblical answer is no, and that things must change in the here and now in order for God's kingdom to be realized.

The prophets believe this so strongly that the presence of prayer in the absence of justice is offensive to them. For in the prophets' line of thought, we are in a covenant with God and when we sing praises in the presence of injustice, it's like a cheating spouse bringing flowers or a politician who courts your vote with one hand and stabs you in the back with the other. Prophets insist that God wants justice instead of prayer, or more specifically that prayer is for us, God does not demand it. What God demands is enough for all of God's children. In the 700s BCE, the prophet Amos railed against prayer and praise by speaking as God and saying, "I hate, despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...take away from me the noise of your songs...but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Dr. King would echo these words centuries later, frustrated in his own ways with hearing the choirs sing out on Sunday in the South amidst the widespread presence of injustice.

Isaiah preaches this to Israel: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts...When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? ...I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your...appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

Then Micah, the prophet from whom we get the words to our benediction hymn, simply says: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to *do justice*, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Now you might wonder why we would pray at all? We have it built into our liturgy, we pray together several times every Sunday for crying out loud! Crossan explains it this way: There are three interpretations to the prophets' stance. One, we are wasting our time with prayer and should stop it immediately. Two, God wants *both* prayer and justice, not one or the other. And the third option is that God prefers justice over prayer...in other words, if God has to choose between our praise and the implementation of "enoughism" into the world agenda, God takes justice.

I see this relationship similarly to the way that Crossan sees it. Prayer (or meditation) and justice (or action) are two sides of a coin. They can be distinguished but not separated. In other words, as Crossan says, if you have prayer without justice or justice without prayer, you have neither...no justice and no prayer. Without some sort of ability to recharge ourselves, our justice widgets run out of juice. And without justice, our prayers are watered down, sometimes to the point that they are tasteless and bland.

Jesus clearly expects us to pray. He expects it so much that he tells us how to do so. It is in that telling that we find a very interesting thing. He opens his instruction to his disciples by telling them a few things not to do - don't pray like the phonies do...in public with your arms raised up, showing off. Don't treat prayer like a performance. You are not to be compassionate and loving only as long as someone is watching. So, when you decide to reconnect to God, to recharge your batteries, do it in a room by yourself and close the door behind you. And don't worry about what to say - you don't need flowery language, you need to set yourself aside so that there's room for God to be present.

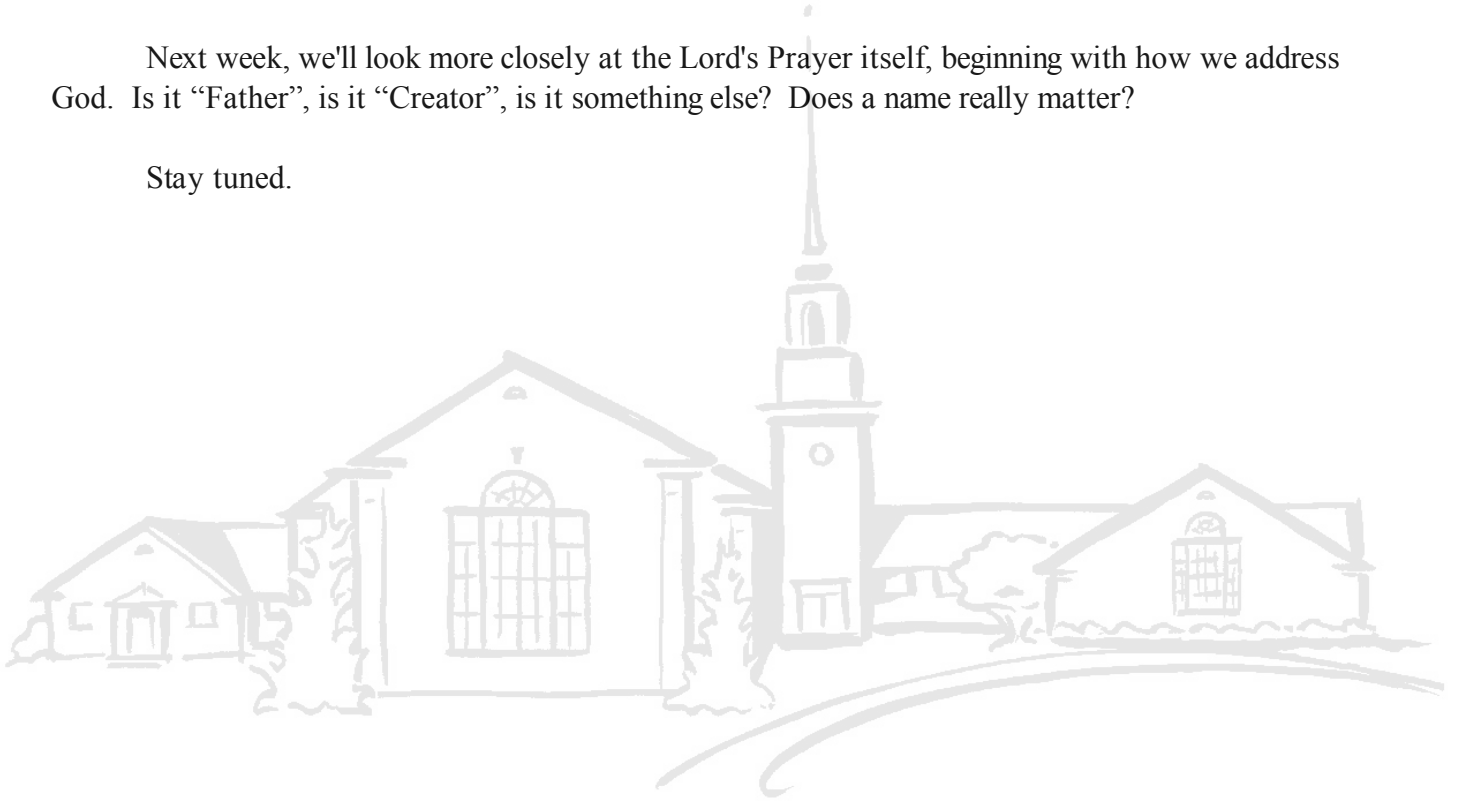
In fact, Jesus says, I'll even give you the words so you don't have to think of any. His instruction is to "pray in this way", by which he means use these words. You don't need tailor made prayers if what we are doing every time we pray is to engage with God in some collaborative effort, whether that is sitting at the bedside of a loved one or dreaming of how the world might be more as it should be. These are the words that Jesus leaves us to help us implement the vision of the reign of God. Eugene Peterson translates the Lord's Prayer from Matthew, the most familiar version, this way:

Our Father in heaven,
Reveal who you are.
Set the world right;
Do what's best— as above, so below.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the Adversary.
You're in charge!
You can do anything you want!
You're ablaze in beauty!
Yes. Yes. Yes.

And then Jesus closes by reminding his students that if they forgive others, then they will find forgiveness. If they don't, they won't. Jesus sets up exactly what Crossan points out to us - namely that this whole idea of prayer is participatory. We are praying in order to remind ourselves of what we should be doing...of how we might be most fully human...of how the reign of God looks...even of what the character of God is like, so that we may go and do likewise.

Next week, we'll look more closely at the Lord's Prayer itself, beginning with how we address God. Is it "Father", is it "Creator", is it something else? Does a name really matter?

Stay tuned.



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