First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

7/24/22

A Conversation With God

Luke 11:1-13

**1**He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” **2**So he said to them, “When you pray, say”:

***Father,[a] may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come.[b] 3 Give us each day our daily bread.[c] 4 And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”***[d] **5**And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, **6**for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ **7**And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ **8**I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. **9**“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. **10**For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. **11**Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for[e] a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish? **12**Or if the child asked for an egg, would give a scorpion? **13**If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit[f] to those who ask him!”

Well, that’s different! Comparing Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer to the more familiar version we pray every Sunday, which is found in the book of Matthew, is an eye opener, for sure. The differences between these two versions probably stems from variations adopted by the different early Christian communities, who adapted the words Jesus taught his disciples, to make prayer more understandable and accessible to folks from different cultures and who spoke different languages.

The wording of the Lord’s Prayer has changed, over the centuries, and if you look at the version found in Matthew 6:9-14, you’ll notice that, depending on which translation you’re using, the phrase “For Thine is The Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory Forever,” may, or may not, be included. The New International Version, which is in our pews, doesn’t include this and neither does the New Revised Standard Version, which is my go-to translation. It does, however, appear in the King James Version, which is the one almost everyone is familiar with.

While the wording has changed, the basic formula of prayer, as outlined by Jesus, has not changed. Salutation, acknowledgement of, and thanks for, God’s supremacy and sovereignty, followed by lifting up our needs and wants.

I got myself in some hot water, when I was an associate Pastor in Seattle, by using the word “Creator,” instead of “Father,” to address God. “You’re changing Jesus’ words!”, the cry went. “How could you possibly be a good Christian, if you do that!”

The fact is, Jesus lived in a patriarchal society, where it made sense to address God as Father, given the very strict roles assigned to men and women in ancient Jewish culture.

We, however, live in a different cultural context, where questions about the true nature of God are natural, understandable, and to be expected, given that we human are a curious lot, along with the fact that no human being has ever seen God, as we read in 1 John 4:12. We have no definitive description of God, which can lead to speculation. But, at the end of the day, we simply do not know what God looks like or whether God is even male.

My personal belief is that God is in all, through all, and around all transcending any effort we make to define God’s true nature. There is certainly nothing wrong with using traditional language to describe God, if that brings you closer to the Creator, but for others seeing God strictly as male, is problematic and actually can create a barrier to a relationship with the Divine.

I truly believe that God does not care about the pronouns we use to describe God. Our God is big enough to not be offended by gender neutral language. God simply wants to have a relationship with us. Whatever language we use to draw closer to God, is language I believe God approves of.

One of the primary ways of being in relationship with God, is through prayer, of course. And while the Lord’s Prayer gives us the basic formula, how we word our prayers becomes less important than the fact that we are willing to enter into a conversation with the Most High God.

While the Lord’s Prayer gives us an outline of how to pray, there are some other guidelines scripture offers guidance about when and where to pray. In Matthew 6:5-15, which serves as the introduction to his version of the Lord’s Prayer, we read these words, ***5 “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. 7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”***

These instructions on when and how to pray, are as relevant today as they were 2,000 years ago. There are people who love to pray in public, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing. When I’m having lunch with clergy friends, yes, we pray over our food. It’s what motivates the need, or desire, to pray in public that can cause problems. Are prayers being offered in sincere gratitude for God’s blessings and bounty? Or is the motivation simply to show as many people as possible how holy and pious we are?

Big, showy, flashy prayers have always made me uncomfortable. Part of me always doubts the sincerity of these types of prayers, whether they come from the pulpit or the 50 yard line at half time. Do we really think that God is so easily flattered when we wear our piety on our sleeves in such a public manner? Do we really think that praying on the 50 yard line, in front of 50,000 people, is somehow going to make our prayers more effective? Do we really think that God is going to pay more attention to our prayers, based on the number of people in the audience? Are these types of prayers truly honoring God or just feeding our own egos?

See, I don’t believe that God needs big, showy, flashy prayers. The God I worship and adore isn’t that insecure. God isn’t counting how many words we use, as if babbling on and on will somehow make our prayers more effective. God isn’t checking our grammar to see if the sentence structure is correct. God isn’t impressed with big words or flowery phrases. When it comes to prayer, God isn’t interested in any of this.

There is a time and place for public prayer and I’ve certainly led my share of them, over the years. My goal, when I’m asked to offer an opening prayer at a public event, is to follow, as closely as possible, the formula laid out in the Lord’s Prayer. The wording I use, in those situations, may depend on who’s in the room and will probably differ each time. That said, at the core of those types of prayers, is my desire to invite God into the space in such a way that honors our Creator and all those present.

Honestly, I believe prayer is about acknowledging that God reigns supreme in heaven and on earth. It’s about recognizing that God will supply all of our needs, but not necessarily all of our wants, it’s asking for forgiveness of our sins and it’s about asking for God’s protection from those things that may cause us to doubt that God’s love and mercy is active and present in our lives.

Some churches have very structured and formal prayers, used for particular times and specific occasions. Other churches feel that the best way to pray is extemporaneously. I believe there’s value in both methods and one way is not better than the other. Again, it’s not the words we use, but the motivation behind the words that counts. Do we simply recite prayers by rote from a prayer book, because that’s what we’ve always done? Or are the prayers we pray extemporaneously just a bunch of words we string together, without giving them a whole lot of thought, because that’s the way we’ve always done it?

What is our motivation, when we pray? Do we pray simply because that’s what’s expected of us as Christians? Do we pray for our own self-aggrandizement? Or do we sincerely want to have a conversation with our God?

The idea that we can have a conversation with God; the knowledge that the creator of all that was, all that is, and all that ever will be, would take the time to not only listen to us, but enter into conversation with us, is absolutely mind blowing, when you stop and think about it.

So, folks, how do you pray? Are your prayers simply for show? Or are you truly interested in having a conversation with God? Here’s the thing; the God of the universe; our God, in all of God’s awesome majesty, is just waiting to for the opportunity to have a conversation with each and every one of us. It doesn’t matter what words we use, or what order we put them in, it doesn’t matter if our understanding of the nature of God differs from someone else’s, it doesn’t matter if the conversation is scripted or if it’s extemporaneous. The only thing that matters is that the prayers we pray become sincere efforts to build a closer relationship with the God we worship and adore. AMEN