

I think I've mentioned to you before that I grew up in a family that didn't attend church. Sure, Santa came every Christmas, and I got a new dress at Easter, but church, worship, prayer ... all that stuff was foreign to me. Except for saying grace at dinner. "God is great, God is good..." We said that every night, a pre-meal ritual not unlike the post-meal ritual of thanking Mom for a delicious meal.

I remember when I was about 5 or 6 years old I realized that what I'd been repeating night after night at grace wasn't a sing-song of random sounds, but actual words. And I remember trying to discern the words of this nightly litany and what they might mean. [It blew my mind to realize that "lettice thankum" wasn't a reference to the salad, but a statement of gratitude: let us thank Him.]

I'll never forget the look on my parents' face when I asked at dinner one night a few years later, "What is God?" The question must have seemed like it came out of nowhere. My mom's look of bewilderment immediately followed by panic and a red face made me think I had said something wrong. "Um, well, um..." she stammered. Over the next few months I followed up that question with others like "What is prayer?" and "If God already knows everything, why would we need to pray?"

And so by the time I was about 10, I thought the whole God thing was a bunch of hooley. "By His hands we shall be fed..." It seemed to me that I fed myself with my own hands, thank-you-very-much. And the Lord wasn't giving us our daily bread; mom was buying it *and* making the sandwiches.

Fast forward a few years: I started attending church with my older brother while he was home from college on summer break. (It was something to do.) I listened to the words and I asked a lot of questions. I remember the priest reciting the same words week after week, telling the story of what he called the Last Supper, and then inviting everyone to pray by saying, "And now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say ..."

Bold? That one word got my attention - every time. The Lord's Prayer, as I had heard it called, seemed pretty tame. Why would anyone be considered bold who prayed that?

Frederick Buechner says that we must be bold because we are declaring that God's Kingdom will come, and God's will will be done. Not 'our kingdom come, our will be done,' but God's Kingdom. God's will. It's only through humility that we can acknowledge that we aren't in control. And it requires boldness to step up and say we're gonna help make it happen.

In the last four weeks, we've heard passages from Luke's Gospel telling us about how those who were called to follow Jesus must go forth and proclaim the Kingdom of God,¹ that when we go forth (carrying nothing with us), we are to tell those we heal that the Kingdom has come near,² that we are to be our brother's merciful keeper just as the Good Samaritan was,³ and that our Lord earnestly desires us to be in relationship with God just as Mary was.⁴

Jesus has called his followers to a radically different way of life ~ far different from how our instincts would lead us to behave. It's human nature to look out for number one, to not simply keep up with the Joneses but try to *be* the Joneses, and live by the motto 'eat or be eaten.' Yet God calls us to a radically different way of life. One that does, in fact, require boldness.

Jesus' disciples were, of course, men of deep faith who were raised in a time and place in which they had certainly been taught to pray. But when they saw that Jesus' prayer life was in some way different from the norm, they asked that Jesus show them how he prays. No doubt they were looking for specific ways to practice their faith that would grant them the same peace, strength and wisdom as their teacher. They must have seen "the coherence between Jesus' prayer life and everything else that he did and said, and so they longed to go deeper into the life of the Spirit that filled him."⁵

And so Jesus models this prayer as an intimate conversation with God, spoken by the individual on behalf of the entire community of God's people. "Our Father," he says – acknowledging that we are all children of God – addressing the one who created us and loves us as we are.

Buechner says that the first half of the Lord's Prayer is a request "to make manifest the holiness that is now mostly hidden, to set free in all its terrible splendor the devastating power that is now mostly under restraint." Buechner asks us to

¹ Luke 9:51-62 on June 30, 2019

² Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 on July 7, 2019

³ Luke 10:25-37 on July 14, 2019

⁴ Luke 10:38-42 on July 21, 2019

⁵ https://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_july_28_2019

consider, if God were to immediately grant our request that God's Kingdom come on earth right now, "if that were suddenly to happen, what then? What would stand and what would fall? Who would be welcomed in and who would be thrown out? Which if any of our most precious visions of what God is and of what human beings are would prove to be more or less on the mark" and which would turn out to be a bunch of hooey?⁶

Only those who share Jesus' vision of God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven would be bold enough to pray this prayer. And only those who aren't content with the status quo would be bold enough to do the work that is required.

The Lord's Prayer, you may notice, is written in the plural. Here Jesus teaches us the importance of praying as a community, not only as a singular individual. Sure he went off to the desert or to the garden to have some alone time with God, but as Jesus shows us time and time again, communion with God is rooted in the context of community, not isolation. Just as we will all benefit from the coming of God's kingdom, we must all work together toward the building of it.

Buechner goes on to say, "You need to be bold in another way to speak the second half [of the Lord's Prayer. We ask God to] give us... forgive us... [protect us]... and deliver us. If it takes guts to face the omnipotence that is God's, it takes perhaps no less to face the impotence that is ours. We can do nothing without God. We can have nothing without God. Without God we are nothing."

Yet despite these powerful words, how often do we say the words of this prayer simply as a recitation? Are we praying with boldness the words our Lord Christ has taught us, or are we thinking about lunch? How grateful are we *really* that God gives us each day our daily bread, and how penitent are we that we've trespassed on others' personhood?

To pray with boldness is to recognize that our voice, our ideas, the longings of our hearts are important to God. It doesn't mean that we'll always get what we want when we want it. But it does mean that we trust that God will respond to the intentions of our hearts and act on our behalf.

But to pray this prayer with boldness also means that we will be agents of making this prayer a reality. God works through you and me to get stuff done. Yes, my mom brought that bread and made my sandwiches, but she could not have done so without the miracle of growing grain, hands and machines that sowed the grain,

⁶ http://day1.org/6221-the_lords_prayer

ground the grain, processed the grain, baked the bread, and transported the bread to the local store; she could not have done so without a job to earn the money to have a car and get to the store, buy the bread, and (the biggest miracle of all) a heart that loved me so much to see to it that I had enough to eat. Yes, indeed, God is great. God is good.

More than anything else, the boldness of Jesus' prayer is that it calls us to transformation, not just as individuals, but as a community. Because Jesus invites the entire community to join as one voice in this common supplication to God, we are reminded, challenged, and inspired to shape our lives around the common emotional, physical and spiritual needs of (1) being fed, (2) being forgiven, (3) being able to forgive others, and (4) being protected. Which means that (1) we will work to the end that all of God's children (young and old) are fed and cared for; (2) we will respect the dignity of every human being; (3) we will work toward reconciliation on interpersonal, communal and global levels; and (4) we will do our best to not be distracted from our single-minded intention to love God, neighbor, and self with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.

That is how God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

In a few minutes, Fr. Furman will invite us to pray the Lord's Prayer. Are you truly bold enough to pray Jesus' prayer? Is it a string of meaningless sounds and syllables that are pronounced at the assigned moment in the liturgy, or are we willing to pray the Lord's Prayer not only with our lips, but with our lives?