

"A Prayer for Revolution" (24July16)
LuKe11:11-3; Colossians1:15-28; Genesis18:20-32

In the Covenant Room this morning, (the UCC congregation) is practicing music as prayer, part of a whole summer series on prayer practices. But here we're focusing on the same stale or problematic words of the Lord's Prayer. Yet maybe we can again encounter these words as central to our faith, and in that way revolutionary and even subversive.

So let's jump in to the prayer of Jesus in Luke's version, a piece at a time. It opens by addressing "Father." I'm still getting accustomed to the versions of this prayer we use here. There are good reasons for adaptations, but also with a risk of missing out; the fact that Jesus uses the term *Father* or *Abba* instead of a typical conception like *Creator* or *Almighty* is an important part of what we learn about this God of Jesus. It is a relationship of intimacy, of care, of trust. Where generic terms *God* or *Spirit* would leave it to our imaginations what in heaven's name we might be dealing with, Jesus instead points to one you know and who knows you. Luther's Small Catechism says the point of this language is to build your confidence, so you can ask just as a child would approach a loving parent.

Not all of us have that kind of relationship with our father. But part of the point is that God is not equivalent with your regular father, and Jesus says as much later in the passage, that even if some earthly parents were evil enough to give a scorpion when their child asked for food, our heavenly Father is not like that. (Though there, I should correct myself. Luke doesn't have a *Father in heaven*, which would still leave distance or some sense of separation. Here Jesus just says "Father," and here and now is part of God's household, with all that exists.)

Again, there's a risk and arguably a historical proneness to contort this for masculinity that reinforces chauvinism and blocks access for women. Yet the image of God Jesus shares is exactly striving to contradict patriarchy. This isn't a stern father, or a punishing father, or an absent father, or with an opposite pairing in a caring, sensitive, supportive, cradling mother. This Father of Jesus nurses us (*see John 1:18*), somehow an attempt to hold images of mother and father simultaneously while highlighting where the problem and redemption's task lie. This certainly shouldn't be the only term we use for God. Still, if it's set aside we might imperil the argument of Jesus and his effort to reshape culture in the ways that that Colossians reading was voicing, standing up against false gods of empire and pompousness and violence. We need caution so Jesus' radical transformation isn't thwarted by backfiring struggles for inclusivity.

I expect we can continue to discuss that in our years to come, but for now we'd better move on to "hallowed be your name." This is old language that probably *could* use updating, since it only calls to mind *Halloween* or the *hallowed halls* of your alma mater or a venerable sports venue. Actually, though, if we can hang on to that image, it may be more descriptive for us than just substituting "holy."

This is about God making God's name respectable. That's a good way to start a prayer, putting the onus on God by saying, "give us a reason to trust you. If you're so loving, prove it."

But it's also an admission that God's name is often not treated as hallowed. It's not only the common conceptions of "taking the Lord's name in vain." Picture how you'd treat those "hallowed halls." Walking into your old school may fill you with memories or hushed wonder. It may not be totally good, but you'd realize how

that had shaped you. Or going to a favorite sports arena may lead you to awe or anticipation. That's what the name of God does in this prayer—brings to mind all that has transpired through the millennia of God's story and also anticipating rightly what's yet to come.

(Only a slight tangent, notice how selling naming rights contorts this process. It's harder to hallow stadiums named after cell phones, insurance companies, or banks. Yet those businesses do understand devotion, though, albeit in an idolatrous way, according to Colossians. In this prayer, too, we have to ask what's in a name and what it does, what we expect from God.)

That leads to the next line, "Your Kingdom come." Again, Luke won't let our vision stray or allow this to be otherworldly. There's no "on earth as in heaven." This is about our lives here and now. I know "kingdom" is another of those controversial terms. Yet, just as God the Father contradicted abusive, bossy, or controlling parents, so this statement is directly in opposition to the prevailing empire. Asking for God's Kingdom meant pushing the Roman Empire out, for the oppressive *Pax Romana* to be replaced by the peace of Christ. And still today, for lives controlled by corporate lobbying and manipulative marketing and capitalist consumption and all those -isms, we do know it's a power struggle.

So this envisions a new Kingdom, though it's another old term and we're not even well-acquainted with the concept of King being negated here. But there's not a great substitute. The "democracy of God" doesn't fit, since we need the unique perspective of Jesus and not the dangers of majority rule (a reality we're having to face in our political environment right now). "Household of God" isn't broad or bold enough. "Kin-dom" could come close, standing for what binds us together and against

what fragments us, but it lacks the oomph of God's presence breaking into our world and lives to change the status quo and bring us out from the realm and stronghold of death into life.

If it helps, John Dominic Crossan suggests you can "mentally rephrase it as the 'ruling style of God' [and] imagine how the world would be if the biblical God actually [ran things]...It dreams of an earth where the Holy One of justice and righteousness actually gets to establish—...say—the annual budget for the global economy." Again, rather than re-trenching fearsome patterns where might makes right, as we pray this it is an invitation to join the reigning of God, living into an entirely new style of encountering the world, which actually frees us from confining structures and stands up for others.

The next petition is "Give us each day our daily bread," which clearly isn't just peanut butter sandwiches much less communion bread, but is the sun and rain and soil and farmland and lack of erosion and pollinators and yeast and farmers and governmental protection and bread machines and factories and roads and all that's required to get you bread. It's a lot to cram into one line (as maybe we're coming to expect).

That was also what John Goltermann was saying in our visit this week. He said that at 82 years old, his prayers in the evening are sometimes 20 minutes long in thanks for all the blessings of his life. He was saying that even amid being down that day, wishing he could do more, reflecting on struggles after his wife's death, and also amid life-robbing dementia.

That may illustrate how this petition is revolutionary. After all, it's at least characteristically American and maybe too human to want more, to be proud of

* Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer*, p78

accumulations, to have greed, the "pretentious symbols of self-aggrandizement" in those big, beautiful words of our Colossians paraphrase. To say thanks when we have an abundance may be good manners, but is hardly revolutionary.

But this petition isn't about always yearning for more. It is gratitude for the fullness of enough. In John Goltermann's words, it doesn't need to lament passing up the "golden opportunities" to climb higher. Instead, it's able to be satisfied. It doesn't ask "give me everything I want," but "give me the bread I need each day."

Oh, but that requires revision, too. It's not "give me." We pray, give *us* what we need. It is communal, not selfishly individualistic, and that's counter-cultural for sure.

As if it weren't difficult to share material goods, the prayer gets harder with "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." Just as the hallowing was about God's name, this is how we view and treat each other's honor. This means not getting what you claim to deserve, not holding to account, not keeping score of winners and losers. That erases a lot of markers we like to tally to prove ourselves worthy. It's a radical word, even more so in Colossians' appraisal that Jesus disarmed those oppressive powers by nailing them to his cross in sacrificial love.

Maybe the first reading from Genesis points in this direction, with a notion of positive contagion, that one good apple can save the whole bunch. It's a fun reading, with Abraham's incremental argument on behalf of justice or mercy or goodness or forgiveness or compassion or healing divisions or whatever we might call it. And while we should disagree with the sense that we have to coerce God away from destruction, we can pretty easily see that as applying to us, as an ongoing effort to offer redemption instead of reciprocal violence, or

meeting evil with evil, bit-by-bit getting ourselves to practice really respecting others by "forgiving everyone indebted to us."

This prayer Jesus continually is teaching us ends "do not bring us to the time of trial." A prayer for deliverance is a fitting conclusion. It's a prayer that all the rest of the prayer works out as it's supposed to, that we're led by the Holy Spirit not to put God to the test and don't find ourselves standing on the wrong side of God's revolution, a prayer that life wins, that forgiveness spreads, that all would have what we need and we would realize it's enough, that God's way becomes the world's way, that we abide in God's care forever.

At that point, all that's left is to say, let it be so: Amen.