

AN EXTRA LENTEN BLESSING

As you're following Grace United Methodist Church's booklet of daily devotions for the 2019 Lenten season, please also enjoy Merrill Litchfield's series of devotions on The Lord's Prayer in its entirety. Note that four of these devotions appear in the Lenten booklet, but here are all of them, each on its own page.

Rattle or Pray?

Read: Ezekiel 37: 1 – 14 Tell the breath, “God, the Master, says, come from the four winds. Come, breath. Breathe on these slain bodies. Breathe life!” Ezekiel 37: 9 (The Message)

C. S. Lewis was not a fan of spontaneous prayers in worship services. When he knew what the words were going to be before they were spoken (as, of course, he would if they were taken from the Book of Common Prayer), he said it freed up his mind to give itself fully to the worship of God. But in a spontaneous prayer, he disliked having to sit as a critic first of what was said, and only later (if time and the pray-er's words allowed) add his “Amen.” As I so often do, I saw his point, and agreed with it. But I'm also aware of a downside to the known-in-advance prayer: our human tendency to let our mouths rattle the words automatically, but let our hearts “take it easy,” and not really pray at all.

I've loved this story from Ezekiel ever since, as a little boy, I heard a men's quartet sing “Dry Bones.” And it comes in handier when I start thinking of thinking of “rattling,” as all of those bones made a huge rattling when Ezekiel (under God's direction) called them together (it maybe sounded like one of my hasty recitations of The Lord's Prayer). But, even when all “rattled” together, even when covered with flesh, those bones did nothing; they just lay there motionless until God told Zeke to call the breath of life to come from the four winds and blow life into that hopeless army. And this is what I'd like to do, not just with the Lord's Prayer, but with all my prayers, especially the ones I say often.

Lewis, in one of his last books, *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*, gives a clue about how he tries to do this. In Chapter Five (or would that be “Letter Five”?), he talks about “festooning” the phrases of the Lord's Prayer, adding fresh words or phrases which decorate, but don't hide the timeless meaning of each phrase. This is what I hope to do, along with you, in these meditations: ask God's Holy Spirit to blow its Breath of Life into my dry words of prayer, that they may better please Him of Whom they are asked.

Prayer: Oh, Holy God, only by the grace of Your Eternal Spirit could a flimsy mortal like me come to You, not as I guess You are, but You as You know Yourself to be. And equally, only by Your grace could I pray as the real me, as You created me to be. Thank You, Lord, that Your grace can take my rattling army of dry words and turn it into streams of living water in the desert of my soul. Thank You, too, if I can share that life-giving drink with those around me. May we all bless You and praise You as our ever-living God. Amen.

Our Father Who Art....

Read: Psalm 19: 1 - 14

“God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.”
Voltaire

This year, I had the opportunity to attend a book discussion class for one of my favorite books: *Perelandra* by (who else?) C. S. Lewis. The essence of this book is “What would our world be like if Eve had succeeded in telling the serpent to buzz off?” We get to see the answer when Lewis’s hero (Elwin Ransom) is sent to another world at the time of its first inhabitant’s temptation. At the climactic end, ceremony merges into celebration as all the characters join in what I like to call “The 151st Psalm.” Not a unison thunder of all the voices, but individual voices calling God’s praises to each other for four pages, after which “by a transition he did not notice...what had begun as speech was turned into sight...He thought he saw the Great Dance.”

Ransom, with a mind as Earth-laden as mine, tries to find the center of all that joyous activity, only to find it’s wherever he looks, but he’s also equally mistaken wherever he looks, for that center is not in any one “where.” Rather like the Voltaire quote.

When we begin the Lord’s Prayer by saying God is in Heaven, are we really cutting God down to only the size of a Heaven that we can imagine? Or are we turning to accept God’s sunrise in all of its fullness and blessing, even though its wholeness is so immensely beyond us? Maybe we should be far more cautious in daring to call upon the fullness of God. He might show up!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we pray (again) that You will teach us to pray, not with quickly mumbled or soon-forgotten words, but with our hearts as You know them to be, as You long for them to become. And we ask again for Your mercy, knowing You have already given it. We praise Your Name, not because we can move You by flattery, but because that’s as close as we can get (so far) to Your Real Truth. Amen.

Hallowed Be ...(IS) Thy Name // Hallowed ... Be Thy Name

Read Exodus 3:1-8, 13 – 15 “And it shall come to pass that whoever calls upon the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, As the Lord has said, among the remnant whom the LORD calls.” Joel 2:32 (NKJV)

When I come to this phrase, I have to admit that I’m praying with two faces: one private, one public. When I’m in public, praying as a member of a group and hoping to contribute to the unity of that group, I have no business disagreeing, until or unless our group ceases to pray and begins to discuss. But when I’m praying privately, I like to rest on Jesus’ promise (Matt. 6:7-8) that God already knows what I need, and what I intend to say. So if other words or thoughts come into my mind, it may be that God wants to teach me something, or wants me somehow to rejoice in Him.

When I’m praying privately, I like to say this line twice. The second time is like most folks say it, with a pause after “Hallowed.” I want to mean something like: “Let me learn how to revere Your Name as the part of Holy Ground that it is: my sandals off, my face covered, and my heart bowed.” But what about the first time; how do I say that differently? I like to pause after “Hallowed Be...”, to fall silent until an unspoken “IS” falls into that silence, followed by a triumphant “THY NAME!”. It helps me to celebrate, rather than just mumble, God’s name. I might easily be wrong, but “God,” though a good collective way to quickly name All of the Trinity, somehow doesn’t sound as personal as “I AM,” the name God chose for Himself when He wanted to hand Moses a “business card” (with His Name on it) to identify Himself to his “clients” (children, actually).

I stumbled onto the beginnings of this idea, that all of the verb “To Be” is God’s Name, many years ago. A semanticist, Alfred Korzybski said somewhere in the 1940s that when humans use the verb “to be,” they imply much more knowledge than any human can have. [C. S. Lewis has a great example of this in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. When Eustace meets a “retired star” in human form, he says, “In our world, a star is a ball of flaming gas.” Ramandu replies: “Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star *is*, but only what it is made of.”] We’re on safer ground in our thinking and communicating if we use active verbs to describe our thoughts. I liked the language called “E-Prime” (English with “to be” removed) but I also discovered what a massive headache it was, trying to wean myself from saying “is.” And God eventually reminded me, by way of this Sinai scene, that “E-Prime” may be a good idea for those who don’t believe in God, who’re going to try to squeeze Him out of His Own Creation, but if we’re

going to deal with an active, shepherding, loving God, we can begin by renewing our reverence for, and our adoring use of, His Name!

Prayer: Holy Father, thank You! Because You are always here, we never have to summon You, yet in love You have given us Your Name! May we learn to know You, and love You in return in our deepest heart! Hallelujah! Amen!!

“Give Us This Day....’

“Two things I ask of you, O LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, “Who is the LORD?” Or I may become poor and steal and dishonor the name of my God. Proverbs 30:7 – 9 (NIV)

This phrase, “give us this day our daily bread”, challenges me not to stop with just mouthing the words at their shallowest, hurrying to get the prayer over, but to meditate on them for the deeper meanings that lurk just out of casual sight, waiting for us to ask for them. For one, are we humble enough to ask only for the things we need, only one day at a time? Or do we try to sneak in “cake, and a Cadillac, too?” Or are we proud that our pantry’s full, and we have our activities planned for the next few weeks? Are we in an increasing danger -or are our children- of not seeing how God provides for us, because a simple glance reassures us that the supermarket has? Sometimes I’ve been moved to pray, “Lord, how long before I realized I was hungry did You begin to grow the food I need today?” Or another need: the oxygen we must have from the air we breathe---how long ago did God waft our last “exhale” past a plant that would pull the carbon out of its Carbon Dioxide to serve as the plant’s own building blocks, and release what we now inhale?

Or, even less tangible than food or air, we need a continuing supply of a loving, forgiving spirit to help ease our way through a contentious, competitive world, one more ready to hurt us than to heal us. Unless, of course, God’s providing has helped us to a loving, supporting community. Like Grace, maybe? Or is it there that we can see most easily how much we need God to provide this kind of love for each other, maybe even more than we need our next burger?

Prayer: Lord, how much we need our daily hungers met, and You do it, day after day. You are the Real God, Whose real providing makes possible our apparent day-to-day success in providing for ourselves. Thank You for the times when, by Your Grace, we can also provide for someone else. Amen.

Thy Kingdom Come

Read: Isaiah 32:1 – 8 “Your kingdom is a kingdom eternal; you never get voted out of office.” Psalm 145:13 (The Message)

I'm aware that quoting from secular (or even more, philosophical) sources doesn't always meet with a welcome, especially in a church setting, where we'd rather know ahead of time that particular philosopher really is on our side, NOT trying to explain us out of existence. But let me live dangerously: Plato, trying to construct his ideal republic, said that if one's virtues did not equal one's power, that power would be misused. Given that the military wields a lot of power, Plato proposed that only the most virtuous men would be allowed into the army. Do you, like me, think that doesn't sound quite like a U. S. Army recruiting ad? How well do we let ourselves be guided by abstract thought? Does it even fit into our imagined blueprints of what it'd take to make our world better?

When it comes to asking God to be *OUR* King, are we sure we really want that? Or are we counting on mindless repetition to dull our own minds to the kind of obedience that having God as our Ruler would require us to give...maybe even without adding our favorite mental reservation: “if I feel like it.” It's easy enough to believe that God would know how to straighten out all the bad guys in the world, but that “easy” disappears when we find out those rules we want to see enacted would also apply to us. “ Lord, do You really mean ME? TITHE??”

I suspect that, as awe-inspiring as our glimpses of the starry universe we live in may be, they are nowhere near as awesome as the Glory of God Himself, who created that spectacle. Somehow, I doubt that any human, faced with the splendor of God, could manage to croak out, “You've gotta be kidding.”

Prayer: Lord, You are the real God; the God of all that is real. Grant that we may be real, as well: really loving, really giving of ourselves, really desiring Your being our King. Amen.

...Thy Kingdom COME, Thy Will Be DONE...

Read: Psalm 25: 4 – 15 “...guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior, and my hope is in you all day long.” Psalm 25:5

I sit to this subject with a smile on my face. A smile at my own foolishness, and maybe even a bigger smile, ‘cause I’m not alone in that foolishness. I’m thinking of that time (a *very* long time ago!) when those unreasonable adults around me demanded that I *memorize* the Lord’s Prayer! And I’m reminded of how convenient this almost-rhyme was, when I needed all the help I could get with “What comes next?” And I’m re-reminded each Sunday, as our collective prayer sounds just a teeny more sing-songy around this particular corner. And, apparently by common agreement, there’s a full-stop grand pause after the word “done,” as if a period had occurred there, plus a heavy intake of breath before attacking that detached chunk of a part-sentence, “On earth as it is in heaven.”

[Time out here: don’t you remember that I wrote, only one or two devotionals ago, that when we pray publicly, part of our job is to give ourselves to our group unity? What am I doing here – making a liar out of myself? May I beg that I’m only discussing? And maybe only discussing changes that I might like to make in my private prayers? But I do thank God that some of the practices we fall into by accident may be smiled at, rather than raising wrath against doing things **wrong!** OK, time back in!]

So what am I proposing to consider using in my private prayers? How ‘bout a new word: *doneonearth*, all said at one gulp? Well, maybe a run-on word isn’t much of an innovation, probably not as welcome an innovation as if I were to actually “do-on-earth” some of His will, rather than wait until heaven to sing about how wonderful His will is? (Always assuming I could *get* to heaven without *doing* His will? – hmmmmmmmm, not so sure about that one!)

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for sometimes letting us see how it was that we learned what we’ve learned, for letting us sneak around our quick-anger reaction against “being accused” into the peace of learning from You how to do just a bit better. Might that be another bit of Your peace, “not as the world gives,” that You long to give us? That You do give us, whenever we will accept it? Amen.

Forgive Us Our Sins....

Read: Psalm 130:1-8 “O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.” **Psalm 130:7-8**

“Can I get away with that?” I don’t know, I only suspect that when Screwtape (the “hero” devil of C. S. Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters*) wants to tempt a little boy away from the kind of obedience that love would give, this question, maybe seasoned with a little smile of mischief, is his favorite bit of bait. “How come I hafta be good?” pops up an awful lot in my own spiritual autobiography, especially if I’m honest enough to count the times I didn’t speak it, but only grumbled it to myself, hoping that God wouldn’t hear me.

Some of you already know that I’ve been in love with the writings of C. S. Lewis since around 1970; the bait I so ravenously chomped upon (yes, there was a hook inside that worm!) was *The Screwtape Letters*. In a July, 1940, letter to his brother, Lewis “confessed” the idea came to him in church. So, do we frown on CSL for “not paying attention to the service,” or praise him for hearing, and obeying, the message God was giving him (I vote for plan “B”)? Even more, I praise God for moving this faithful Christian to share his explorations of “the psychology of temptation” with us, to give us more freedom to think about what our choices might really be when we ourselves have to wrestle with “who will save me from this body of death?”

The average human defense (so far as I may know anything about it) against the dangers of temptation sounds mostly like a string of excuses. “It wasn’t such a big sin; I mean I didn’t murder anybody” almost convinces me, until Screwtape says, “Murder is no better than cards, if cards can do the trick.” And I can realize (again) that NO size sin—not even my favorite dinky one—can be allowed anywhere near God’s perfect holiness. And again I remember there is no hope to be found in my own goodness: my only hope is in God’s forgiveness.

Prayer: Holy Father, You see through all of my foolishness, such as my hope that my bad acts can be waived away, when what I need is to repent those times when I chose someone or something other than You and Your Life-giving Love. You are my only hope; let me not be satisfied only with knowing that. Thank You for the times when You help me to confess it in love and gratitude. Amen.

AS WE FORGIVE

Read: Matthew 18:21-35 “Peter got up the nerve to ask, ‘Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?’ Jesus replied, ‘Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.’” **Matthew 18:21 & 22 (The Message)**

How well does your memory work? Or, for us senior citizens, should I say, “Still work?” One measuring stick that we’d just as soon not have is how often old hurts pop up again...and hurt just as much as they all did the first time. “But I thought I forgave that! How often do I have to keep forgiving that same, undeserving rascal?” And there we are, standing in Peter’s foot-tracks, wishing forgiveness were a one-and-done proposition, hoping a few lightly spoken words will let us go free. Free from the remembered hurt, free from those embarrassingly quick-to-appear wishes for revenge, free from our guilty fear of being on God’s bad side, just because somebody chose to wrong us.

I don’t know if it’d help to know we’re in good company on this issue. When C. S. Lewis was nine years old, he was shipped off to boarding school (only a month after his mother died). It didn’t help a bit that the master of that private school was erratic and brutal; after the school failed, “Oldie” was declared insane. I don’t think it helped much that Lewis himself escaped from being “Oldie’s” target, having to watch as one of his classmates was being beaten may have left Lewis with fewer bruises, but there was no disguising the wrongness of the beating, or the sense of one’s own helplessness. After Lewis accepted Christ, he tried again and again to forgive Oldie—only to have the memory come back, bringing with it the fear and hatred that again demanded his forgiveness. It wasn’t until late in his life that Lewis succeeded in forgiving “Oldie”...and had it stick.

Nobody wants to have Alzheimer’s, but as long as our memories still work, we may have to re-forgive the same hurt over and over, until we wonder just how close we’re getting to that 490. Thank God for His Grace, which persisted for us, even going as far as the Cross to reclaim us from our sin. And thank God, too, that His Grace will still supply us, even beyond number 491!

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for Your promise that You’ll forgive us if we also forgive, especially those who’ve hurt us. How much joy will surround us all in Your heaven, when there is no hate or hurt left around us! Amen.

Lead Us Not Into Temptation...

Read: Hebrews 2:10-18 “Because he himself suffered when he was being tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” **Hebrews 2:18**

Once in a while, I need to remind myself that parts of our Bible are poetic. Having special things to say, the writers search for special words to help with the saying. Does anyone want to question if Jesus himself was poetic? Well, check out what his mom did in the *Magnificat*, poetry just might run in the family. Especially so, if we remember it was his Heavenly Father who teamed up with Jesus to create the language that sometimes rises as high as poetry, even though He/They knew us humans would misuse that (sometimes lovingly, sometimes spitefully), too. But poetic effects, special though they are, also present us with a need to be interpreted with as much care as they were written.

A quick, shallow reading of “Lead us not into temptation....” might seem to imply that God has a choice of whether or not to lead us into temptation, and that we need to ask Him specifically not to choose that. It doesn’t take much meditation to figure that meaning has something wrong with it. We need to keep searching for another meaning, much closer to His holiness. If we add “you” (the implied subject of an imperative statement and our obvious subject in this situation) to the front of this phrase, something wonderful happens: a simple, declarative statement, very clear in its meaning appears: “You lead us not into temptation.” Or, maybe we could rephrase that: “You are our haven of safety when temptation shows up.” So if God won’t lead us into temptation, how do we end up there so often? We might have to look at our own willfulness before we start hollering at God because we’re in a sticky situation.

Prayer: Lord, teach us to be careful, especially when it comes to how we walk with Your Holy Spirit. Guide us away from thinking You an ogre that we have to be afraid of; lead us instead to love You enough to want to obey You. Your love, Your forgiveness matter so much more than our whims of what we’d like to get away with. Amen.

But Deliver Us From Evil

Read: Psalm 51 “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.” Psalm 51:12 NIV

In writing about this subject, I think I have to confess to having prayed one of the dumbest prayers ever to come out of the human mouth or mind: the “beat me up” prayer. Essentially, I confessed I was unwilling to accept God’s loving Spirit, ‘cause I liked my favorite things better, so I asked God to beat me up, to force me into loving and obeying Him. I don’t actually know whether God smiled at that kind of foolishness, or wept, but I’m grateful that His answer was to persist in loving me and providing for me until I had grown enough older to see my attitude for the raving bosh it was.

Nowadays, I mock that frame of mind, when I’m working on a jigsaw puzzle, by claiming I’m going to fetch a sledgehammer, “...and THEN it’ll FIT!” But I’m afraid there are an awful lot of people who still put their first and deepest trust in some kind of force. Like the ones who try to testify to the love of God by citing the horrors of Hell, hoping to scare their listeners into repentance. As if it weren’t scary enough to realize that the freedom God gives us includes the freedom to choose Hell rather than His love. As somebody I often quote says, “The door to hell is locked from the inside.” So when my natural selfishness wants to exclude somebody from my life, my love, oh, how I need Him to show me again that His heaven is among all those who love Him, as well as everybody around them; how I need Him to deliver me from my own evil!

Prayer: Lord, like the psalmist, I ask You to give me a willing spirit, that I may be eager, not only to receive the joy of Your salvation, but also to share it with your children, who are hungry, as I was and still am, for Your love, but foolish enough to choose against the food they are starving for. From all kinds of evil, including the ones we’d like to choose, deliver us, loving Father. Amen.

Doxology

Read: Matthew 6:5-15 “ For yours is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” [Footnote to Matthew 6:13, NIV, with a note that it’s found in some late manuscripts].

Do you get the impression that much of the Bible was written by men? Like this phrase, added to the original prayer in Matthew which apparently hopes both to praise God and impress its hearers? It was drawn from I Chronicles 29:11, from a prayer of King David. I wonder what kinds of words would have been chosen if the ones doing the choosing were women, those who can share with God in the giving of new life and the nurturing of it? Those who live through the experience of discovering that the cost of that gift involves blood, pain, and unremitting love? I sometimes like to let my imagination overflow with the good words that the ladies might choose, that could also praise God: “... the glory,... and the love and the mercy, the joy and delight, the blessing and the providing, the comfort and the reassurance....” We’d run out of pages before we’d run out of praises, I think. We’d be unlikely to include all of the possible words, but we’d be very likely to blow the current version’s Reader’s Digest brevity.

I don’t mean to urge that this prayer that Jesus gave us as a pattern needs to be “revised”, “improved”, or otherwise “monkey-wrenched”. I would urge (again) that when we pray together, we can value the unity this prayer offers to us. But when we’re praying by ourselves, we can use these prescribed words, not as our jail cells, but as springboards, to bound into God’s abundance with overflowing delight and gratitude. Bringing a few, fresh words of our own to add to those Jesus gave us just might help.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, how can we praise You enough? Thank You for getting us started, but we also ask for Your help in not quitting too soon. Thank You for the promise of eternity, so we can at least get a good start on all the praises You deserve. Amen.

A More Personal Note

Read: Psalm 5: 1 – 8 “And when you pray, do not keep babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.” Matthew 6:7

Over the years that I've been chasing this devotional habit, some of you have been kind enough to suggest there should have been one more pastor in my family [there were plenty, thanks: Dad, three of my brothers, one sister-in-law, and now one brother lay-licensed]. I appreciate the compliments, but I refuse to second-guess the route that my Good Shepherd has led me. I'm fairly sure that this half-page format is a good match for my limited attention-span (and my unwillingness to spend much time in study, unless it's C. S. Lewis!).

So no, so far as I know, it's not another step in any direction (except towards God) that I've ended up writing this penny-preacher's sermon-series on the Lord's Prayer. The idea did not come to me in a big chunk, but rather by scattered pieces, which only eventually teased me into attempting the missing parts. And maybe adding this little bit to the subject in general.

I like making daily use of the Lord's Prayer myself, as a defense against my hit-and-(maybe-even-more)-miss tendencies in personal (non-)disciplines. But, as with any set form, I find myself becoming curious: am I really praying, or merely mouthing the words? That can be a dangerous question: Lewis's childhood insistence on "realized prayers" (by which he meant "fully emotionalized") were one of the things that drove him first to distraction, then to (relieved) atheism while he was still at boarding school. But I'm also aware of the human tendency to mechanize things: like using prayer wheels to "say" the same words over and over. So I like to question what words I use, how I use them, and whether I can use them better.

Prayer: Oh, Holy Spirit, Jesus promised that if we had to speak in front of kings that we were not to worry, that You would give us the words we need. How much more do we need to know Your words when we speak to You, the King of Kings, our Creator, our Redeemer, our unfailing Love? Here, also, we ask You for our daily need. Amen.