

“Finishing Our Sentences”
Ecclesiastes 5:1-3/Matthew 6:1-8

Years ago, the kindergarten and first grade classes of the Edmonds Presbyterian Church were memorizing the Lord’s Prayer. The teachers of that Washington State congregation had asked the children to practice at home, perhaps saying the prayer at mealtime or before going to bed. A few weeks into that effort, the parents of a child named Kelly Anne Roraback shared with the teachers how their daughter had been overheard to pray earnestly in this way: “Our Father who aren’t in heaven, Hollywood be thy name. The Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as you’re in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forget our debtors. Lead us not in tentation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the liberty and justice for all. Amen.” (*Presbyterians Today*, October 1997, p. 5)

While I hope her parents and teachers gently helped Kelly Anne refine her words, that effort marked a terrific start. One of my favorite parts of worship as a pastor has always been when, as a gathered community, we offer that prayer aloud and I hear a young voice above all the rest, speaking the right words, but a half beat off in rhythm. No matter what our age, of course, the purpose of that prayer is not simply to learn the right words or the usual pace in speaking it aloud, but rather for the Lord’s Prayer to shape and sustain us; that no matter how long it has been since we first learned its phrases or how recently we have spoken it again that we allow its familiar words and rhythm to open up meaningful communication with God.

Given its significance upon the lives of believers for two millennia and the possibility for any of us to speak it without thought, we are going to spend time here over the coming weeks reflecting on the Lord’s Prayer together. One can find that model for prayer in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, but the versions are not identical. Our focus will be on Matthew’s account as it is more detailed and closer to the words we speak. On some of the Sundays ahead, we will linger with a single verse or only part of one to ponder more closely what Jesus might have been seeking for us to understand in its words. We are giving it such attention with the hope that such reflection will enable us to offer that prayer moving forward with renewed insight and meaning. This morning we begin not with the prayer itself, but with the setting for the moment when Jesus said to his followers “Pray then in this way, ‘Our Father who art in heaven...’”

He spoke those words as part of an extended address known as the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew’s account of that homily starts with the preceding chapter when we are told that it occurred on a day when Jesus saw a large crowd near the Sea of Galilee, went up a hill and sat down. His disciples drew near and he began to speak: “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus said “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” After offering the Beatitudes, he went on to talk about salt and light, anger and adultery, of the need to turn the other cheek and that difficult call to love one’s enemies. Only then, does Jesus offer the words we read moments ago.

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them,” he begins. Jesus speaks of times when persons give alms--financial donations—not to help the poor, but to evoke praise from others for their generosity. He calls for a kind of giving offered without public attention and goes on to speak of prayer as offered in the same way. “And whenever you pray,” he continues, “do not be like the hypocrites for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners so that they may be seen by others... But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Now, as one whose profession involves frequently praying aloud in public places of worship and often while standing, Jesus’ words could call into question that part

of my vocational life. Yet even more than wanting to avoid his label of “hypocrite,” I trust that given what he has just said about the giving of alms, we can conclude that his primary point here is not a warning to clergy, but for all people to avoid prayers whose chief goal is to bring attention to oneself. Instead, Jesus offers this instruction: “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

When Jesus speaks of “Gentiles” here he is not using the term in the way that we usually interpret; namely for individuals who were not Jews before choosing to follow Jesus. Instead, given how this part of that homily comes at the start of his ministry and before it became clear his work would include all people—Jew and Gentile—in this moment, Jesus is speaking about the nonbeliever and in particular a style of prayer that the pagan would offer in that era.

Professor Tom Long explains. “In the popular religions of the first-century world,” he writes, “getting the gods to respond to one’s needs was a bit like a person today attempting to get service from a government bureaucracy. There were so many gods and so many subdivisions of the divine infrastructure, one was never sure from which god to request a certain service. Once one did locate the right godly contact, a little verbal bribery would often grease the skids. So, the prayers of pagans were piled up with divine names in hopes of hitting the right one and filled with ingratiating compliments to curry the god’s favor. So when Jesus criticizes piling up ‘empty phrases’ the target is not lengthy prayers per se, but what could be called ‘safecracker’ prayers; that is, windy and fawning prayers that attempt to use flowery charm to pick the lock on the favor of the gods, to manipulate the gods into action by uttering the right combination of words.” (Long, Thomas G. *Matthew*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997, pp. 68).

Perhaps it was a similar concern that evoked the insights we read from the book of Ecclesiastes that urged believers to “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools...Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God...let your words be few.” Again, not to keep piling up empty phrases, but instead to listen.

Chuck Swindoll, a Texas pastor and author, once told of a moment when he received that same reminder as a father. “I vividly remember,” he wrote, “some time back being caught in the undertow of too many commitments in too few days. It wasn’t long before I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day. Before long, things around our home started reflecting the pattern of my hurry-up style. [One night] after supper...Colleen wanted to tell me about something important that had happened to her at school that day. She hurriedly began ‘Daddy-I-wanna-tell-you-somethin’-and-I’ll-tell-you-really fast.’ Suddenly realizing her frustration, I answered ‘Honey, you can tell me...and you don’t have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly.’ And his daughter replied, ‘Then listen slowly.’” (*Leadership/92*, p. 46)

In his first sermon, Jesus says that God always listens slowly to us and that we don’t need to pile on words or utter them in rapid fashion to get attention. “Do not be like them,” Jesus says of the nonbeliever and then adds “for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

That insight about the knowledge of God raises a question. If God already knows what we need, then why bother to pray? What’s the point if God already knows? It is a question that did not originate with our time, of course. Augustine of Hippo, the 4th century theologian addressed the same manner when in writing about this verse asked “Does it make sense to pray?” He then answered “Yes--the very effort we make in praying calms the heart, makes it clean, and renders it more capable of receiving the divine gifts which are poured out upon us in a spiritual

manner. For God does not hear us because he seeks the favor of our prayers...But *we* are not always prepared to receive.” (cited by Froehlich, Karlfried in *The Princeton Theological Seminary Bulletin*, Supplementary Issue, No. 2, 1992, p. 78)

“Your father knows what you need before you ask him,” Jesus says and in the very next verse begins to spell out his model for prayer. Thus, it is apparent that Jesus himself did not view God’s knowledge as a reason to stop praying, but as encouragement to begin.

Again, it is Tom Long who in writing about those introductory words concludes “God is no stranger to us and that is the point of Jesus’ word about prayer. Jesus reassures us that we pray, not as outsiders, but as God’s children, tenderly, honestly, and confidently. In our secret, whispering prayers we are known so well that God, like a mother listening with her heart to her children, can finish our sentences.” (Long, Thomas G. same citation as above, pp. 68-9)

I love that image of one who “can finish our sentences,” for it captures this sense of our being known so well by God that he literally knows our words before they are spoken. Many of us are blessed with people like that in our lives: parents with their children or vice versa, a spouse or life-long friend, a team member or supervisor. When we have that kind of relationship, there are moments we can predict what the other will say and they can do the same with us. Certainly that can be a problem if it means we don’t fully listen or aren’t fully heard. I’ve fallen prey to that risk at times and perhaps you’ve seen evidence of that in yourself, too.

Yet God isn’t like that. God’s ability to finish our sentences means that we can speak with fewer words; that we don’t have to fill in the gaps with background or explanation and instead can just start. Trusting that the one to whom we are praying is ready to listen and ready to respond precisely because he already knows.