

Pentecost 9C
The Rev. Emily Richards
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Be Bold in Prayer

In the first parish I served, the family church of 50 members, we had a very precocious two year old named Rebecca, who of course got a lot of attention because she was one of the youngest in our community. She was very comfortable in worship and always wanted her presence to be known. I can still hear her little voice echoing the Lord's Prayer. *Our Father-Awoh Fadder, who art in heaven-who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name-hahwo-ed be tie name...* As precocious as Rebecca was, she was still a few years away from reading and had only just begun to talk, but she knew the Lord's prayer by heart and proudly belted it out on Sunday mornings.

The Lord's Prayer is the one prayer that most of us have known by heart since we were young children. It is central to our worship experience as well as to our private devotion. And it is the one prayer that you hear in any church service on a given Sunday no matter the denomination. As an introduction to the Lord's Prayer, every single Sunday you hear me offer: *And now as our Savior taught us, we are bold to say...* How often do we stop and think about this prayer that is so significant to our lives of faith? Do we ever really consider that we are being bold when we pray this together?

Remembering that these words were first taught by Jesus to his disciples, parts of this prayer would have come across to these faithful Jews as not only bold, but even presumptuous and irreverent. This prayer is addressed to Abba which we have always translated as Father. However, the word Abba in Hebrew is more accurately translated as Papa or what we might say-Daddy, a child's word. To Jesus' disciples it may have been quite extraordinary that he addressed God in such a personal and familiar way.

And yet, this was exactly the kind of intimacy he had with his heavenly Father and what he expected for his disciples, as well. When we are praying this prayer we too are claiming that the One who is the Holy Other, the transcendent, omnipotent Creator of the Universe is also so close to us that we dare call Him-Daddy. We reach out to God, asking and begging and arguing with the same level of intimacy that we would have with our own fathers and mothers.

Another aspect of this prayer's sheer boldness is found in the phrases, "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done." Before we are to even think about praying for ourselves or our own needs we focus on God. It is the in-breaking of God's Kingdom, God's realm of justice and peace, mercy and wholeness that we should first be praying for and then working towards. These phrases express our longing and our hope for not only a taste of God's Kingdom, but the full experience of the feast here and now. Our own personal needs are also understated by the fact that the entire prayer is in the plural form. There is no "I" or "me" in the prayer, only "our" and "us". These words remind us that we can not pray this prayer and then consider ourselves to be a private Christian. Faith is a shared experience. When we say these words, we are offering them up to God, not only for ourselves, but for those sitting next to us in the pews, those down the street at St. Luke's or St. Paul's, and those in Africa and England. I believe we are also offering them up for our Muslim and Jewish and Buddhist brothers and sisters, as well as our friends who consider themselves to have no faith, because every single human being is a beloved child of God and worthy of our care and concern. The boldness of this prayer is found in its lack of self-centeredness. We are taught to pray as a way to deepen our relationships with God, but also with the friend and stranger in our midst.

When we do reach the part of the prayer where we offer up our petitions, all four come in the form of a command. Just as we are presumptuous in how we address God in this

prayer, we are also presumptuous in how we ask or rather plead with God. *Give us...Forgive us...Lead us...Deliver us...* There's no polite requesting going on here-just honesty and directness. Theologian John Douglas Hall writes, "How direct, how ungentle, how almost rude the prayer seems...it shuns all indirect rhetoric to the point of pushiness! Pious convention has conditioned most of us to repeat this prayer so quietly and reverentially that we fail to recognize how we are risking an aggressiveness incommensurate with bourgeois manners. There is no 'Please,' none of the softening, pious (and often wheedling) interjections that often mark what is called 'spontaneous' prayer-'Oh dear Father', 'blessed Lord', 'sweet Jesus,' and so on." The story Jesus tells following the prayer of the persistent individual who keeps knocking on his friend's door at midnight reinforces the point of the Lord's Prayer: prayer is neither a timid nor insincere act.

At times we are too polite with God, as if we are tiptoeing around God. I've always wondered that if we are to be as close to God as we are with those we love the most, then why is it so difficult to be that direct and honest with God? Then I remember that it can be just as difficult to be honest and direct with those closest to us.

I can only speak for myself, but I believe a big part of the reason is fear. Just as I am afraid sometimes to trust those in my life who love me the most, I am also afraid to trust God. I am afraid sometimes that God won't actually love me that much. I am afraid to be that vulnerable with God. I am afraid that God won't answer. I am afraid to be that bold. Fear can be a barrier for many of us, in our human relationships and in our relationship with our Heavenly Father. It can keep us from being bold and bold is what Jesus teaches us to be.

"Seek and keep on seeking," he says. "Ask and keep on asking. Knock and keep on knocking. There is nothing to fear. Be persistent. Be pushy. It is the way to pray

authentically. It is the way to come to know me and my Abba's love for you and for the world." Each time we say the Lord's Prayer may we recall what Jesus is teaching us and may his words take away our fear, generating in us the confidence to be that bold with our loving Abba in all of our prayers.