

Genesis 18:20-32
Psalm 138
Luke 11:1-13
Proper 12

The Reverend Laura Palmer
St. Peter's Glenside
July 22nd, 2022
Year C

The Answer is Always Yes

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

My relationship with The Lord's Prayer is intimate. Not because I'm a priest, but because I remember my mouth filling with warm blood when I pulled a tooth in the first grade after the words "Give us this day our daily bread...." Needless to say, this was decades ago when prayers were said every morning at the start of many public schools.

Decades later, my relationship with the Lord's Prayer is still intimate because I pray it every morning and every night, and several times a day, sometimes more, in the hospital. I use it because it's so well-known and people usually join in and pray along with me. Simple, familiar, and reflexive in all of us, one wonders what more is there to say about it that hasn't been said a thousand times before?

One new idea I discovered this week was through the writings of Evelyn Underhill, the Christian mystic, who famously said, "If God was small enough to be understood, he wouldn't be big enough to be worshipped."

In Abba, her small, magnificent book on The Lord's Prayer, Underhill draws striking parallels between the Eucharist and the prayer. In both, the Holy and the human meet. In both, we seek transformation. In both, simple, ordinary elements, bread and wine are transformed "by the action of the Holy, and made the food and salvation of the soul." In both transformation that comes through transcendence. And sacrifice and surrender are the axis are which animates the mystery.

We pray that God's kingdom will come, and his will be done, so reflexively it's easy to miss what a dare that is, what surrender. Not my will, but thine. A dangerous prayer if there ever was one.

Underhill points out that:

We do not know what possibilities, what mysteries, may still be hidden in the unexpressed design. Yet because each step of this descending prayer is a movement of faith, obedience, and love, we bring the infinite with us; as did Christ himself when he came down from his night of communion on the mountain to his redemptive work among us...the life of prayer follows the path of Incarnation.¹

We are asking, in effect, when we pray the Lord's Prayer to make our hearts lowly manglers where our Lord can be born into our worlds, our simple and humble worlds. Better call the midwife? No need-- because it's you and me; midwives to the divine in every day of our lives.

If this week's sweltering and oppressive heat hasn't turned your brain into a puddle, you might have noticed that the Lord's Prayer in Luke is shorter than the prayer we routinely pray which is the version found in Matthew. The prayer appears only in Luke and Matthew. Matthew's version – the most common in Protestant churches-- is more elaborate and includes the lines "Thy will be done" and "Deliver us from evil."

Without taking too big a dive into Biblical scholarship, the short answer for this is that Matthew and Luke placed the prayer at different points in Jesus' ministry: In Matthew, it's early on—when Jesus was teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in Galilee—and in Luke, it's later in Jesus' ministry, shortly before his death.

The challenge in this Gospel text for a hospital chaplain is not the Lord's prayer but what follows: "Ask, and it will be given you: search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks, receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

Many have been come to believe in an Amazon Prime God—a God who will deliver whatever they ask for if they pray hard enough, if they're good enough, have been to Mass enough, and so on. Their prayers will be answered in *the way that they want*" which, in my daily world of pediatric oncology, means their children will be cured of cancer.

¹ Underhill, Evelyn, Abba: Meditations Based on the Lord's Prayer, Church Publishing, 1994

While I always join them in their hope, it puts me in a bit of a bind because while I believe prayers are always answered, I believed they're answered in God's time, not ours, and often in ways that seem to be the opposite of what was sought. A child dies-- healed perhaps in eternal life, but not cured in this one. I remember one heartbroken mother asking me weeks after the child died "Why weren't my prayers good enough?"

So why pray at all? Because I know that prayer always changes me – although (mostly) I have no idea if it changes God.

I also easily embrace mystery, awe, and wonder, which is so often where I meet God. – which can range from the infinite, as in the images of the cosmos--- millions of years before Christ--that have been beamed back to us from the Webb telescope, or in the eyes of my daughter and granddaughter, or even in a sliver of a zinnia seed that I first planted in an egg carton many weeks ago which is now about to burst into bloom.

The legendary preacher and scholar, Fred Craddock, said that prayer has the power "to hammer us all into vessels that can accept the answer when it comes."

That's the catch, isn't it? It's much easier to pray "Let my will be thy will" until something turns up on our doorstep that we never asked for, wanted, or feel able to bear.

We give thanks in the familiar Eucharistic prayer for "being fed by these holy mysteries in the sacrament of body and blood" and yet often flail against mystery when it slams up into our lives.

But the real surprise for me in this week's text – which made it feel vibrant and new—came, as it often does, in the writing of Debie Thomas, in a Journey with Jesus reflection three years ago. Thomas points out what I had completely missed:

There is only one promise in this entire Gospel lesson. Only *one*. Jesus concludes his teaching on prayer with a striking sentence: "If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"²

² Thomas, Debie, "Journey with Jesus," A weekly webzine for the Global Church, July 21, 2019

Thomas continues to drive home her point:

What Jesus promises to us in answer to our prayers is the Holy Spirit. That's it. That's all. *There is no other promise or guarantee.*³

This shifted everything for me because, writes Thomas:

When we contend in prayer, God will not hold God's loving, consoling, healing, transforming, and empowering Spirit from us. When it comes to no-holds-barred absolutely self-giving generosity, God's answer to all of our prayers will always be YES.⁴

I feel freer now in prayer because after year of thinking my prayers weren't this enough or that enough, I've let go of judgement. They're my prayers. And I understand now, finally, that in prayer, what we're really doing is making ourselves available to God, throwing open the pathway and door way of our hearts so the Holy Spirit can come in. AMEN

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.