

How do we pray in times like these?

The Rev. Barb Ballenger

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How do we pray when our faith gets stretched thin, when the newspapers bleed heartbreak, when we can't pull away from the Facebook drama, the national trauma?

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That's a good question on this Sunday when the Gospel of Luke offers up the Lord's Prayer for our reflection. This is the short form. It's missing a lot of the words we find in the Gospel of Matthew, not to mention our liturgy. And where's the doxology?

But I find these spare instructions from Jesus helpful. He doesn't simply offer us words here. He offers us a way. And it's this way that we need right now.

And the way of the Lord's Prayer begins with a leap of imagination. Because prayer insists that we imagine God.

So I invite you to take a breath and dare to imagine (you're going to work harder than me today, I'm afraid)...I want you to imagine God. Do not stop at the white man with the long beard. Go a little beyond this please. What does your heart most long for in times like these? What image fills the space where God belongs?

When Jesus imagined God he saw a Father, and he called him Abba, Pappa.

Now Scripture scholars tell us that the idea of God as a Father is really unique to Jesus. Up to this point in the Jewish imagination, God's name is unspeakable and unprintable. The references to God pretty much mean Lord or king. Jesus doesn't go to that place. But rather he goes to the much more intimate, loving and generative place of family.

Jesus makes so bold as to say that God is not just his Abba, but ours as well – which places us all in the realm of that family. That's why we use that phrase "we are bold to say" when we launch into this prayer. Because it was a pretty big departure for Jesus and for the early Christians who followed his way. Risky, bold, unorthodox, Abba.

That's a good place to start in times like these.

But our Abba is no Hallmark card Daddy. This Abba still bears the Divine Holy unspeakable name: other, ineffable, wild, not from these parts, Lord of a kingdom not of this world.

And Jesus suggests that we ask for that kingdom to come. Here. To be our world. And that too requires a huge leap of imagination.

So let's go there. Close your eyes. Deep breath. Imagine the world that God longs for – What does such a world look like? What does such a Philadelphia look like? Dare to imagine it right now And ask your heart if it wants that world too.

Father, your Kingdom Come.

We can see it. We can imagine it. We may have even tasted the Kingdom that is at hand in our own bursts of love, or joy, or reconciliation, or second chances. It is now and it is not yet.

I've heard the coming of the kingdom of God described as "in-breaking."

And it seems to me that an in-breaking thing does not leave the thing it is breaking into intact. In-breaking isn't pretty, even if it's slow and hard to detect because the current kingdom is fighting back with everything it has.

So we have to take a big breath when we pray for the kingdom to come, especially if we're particularly attached to this one.

The kingdom that's coming may be God's will, but it's also our work. It's hard work, hungry and thirsty work in times like these.

What sustains you in this work? What is the bread that gets you from one day of following Jesus into the next? Take a breath, call it to mind, what do you need in order to do the work of Kingdom readying and God welcoming? What does it look like? Or Who?

Father, give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins. For we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And here's where Jesus puts words in our mouths. This is essential to the Way of the Lord's Prayer: admitting that we'll sin. We'll fall down. We won't love perfectly; sometimes we'll botch the job. And we'll be hurt as well. The Prayer offers a way to stop that downward spiral: admit our fault and forgive those who hurt us. We'll never be perfect. At best we're good. And beloved. And able to get back on track – not only with God's help but with the help of this community that's praying with you.

Because the words aren't My Father who art in heaven... it's Our Father. Jesus never imagined that we'd be praying this prayer alone. Jesus knows we don't sin alone and we don't reconcile alone.

Take a breath. Now take another breath. Cause I'm going to ask you to imagine someone whom you would like to be able to forgive. I'm not going to suggest you go into

everything that might entail right now, or into everything that led to the breach. But just allow yourself in this safe and loving space to imagine-- a life where you and the person who hurt you are well and whole and the breach is healed.

Take a breath. Now take another breath. Cause I'm going to ask you to imagine someone you need to ask for forgiveness. Whom have you hurt? You don't have to relive the whole mess, or do all the work in this moment. Just imagine in this safe and loving space you and that person well and whole and the breach healed.

Father, do not bring us to the time of trial. Luke's version does not say do not lead us not into temptation. He says something more like, do not bring us to the point of no return: that moment when our divisions get so impacted that we can't even imagine what reconciliation or healing might look like. So we pray, Father don't let us get that far gone.

Deliver us.

This prayer is not just words. It's a way. And keeping on this way requires persistence, it demands constant relationship, uninterrupted contact with the Abba who desires to bring humanity together under one tent. The us that's implied in "Our Father" isn't the little "us" of St Peter's, or the little "us" of the Episcopal Church, or the teeny tiny us of our biological families or our hand-picked friends. It's the great big us of humanity.

And to get everybody under that tent, we've got to keep seeking, keep knocking, keep asking. God is already making that kingdom come – so we don't need to keep banging on God's door as if God doesn't know right from wrong. But if we ask, God will accompany us as we knock on our own doors, search our own hearts, question our own intentions.

That's God's answer to the Lord's Prayer.

Amen.