

Sermon for Zion, December 15, 2019 – The Sunday of Joy

Hymns: 119 – Hope is a Star vss 1,2,3; 114 – Emmanuel; 126 – On Jordan’s Bank;
115 – Hail to the Lord’s Anointed

Scripture: Luke 11:1-4

Sermon Title: Joy Through Prayer

Luke 11:1-4 (NLT)

Once Jesus was in a certain place praying. As he finished, one of his disciples came to him and said, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

Jesus said, “This is how you should pray:

“Father, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon.

Give us each day the food we need, and forgive us our sins,

as we forgive those who sin against us.

And don’t let us yield to temptation.”

Let me bring you back in time to the early 1960s. It is Christmas Eve, just before dinner, and time for my family’s phone call to Germany. We forget what transatlantic calls were like back then – a real rigmarole, and a tremendous expense. Every second counted. You’d call the operator, tell her (it was always a “her”) the number you wanted, and then you’d wait to see if the connection would get through. The unfamiliar ring, the whole family with ears pressed to the single receiver on the black wall-mounted phone, and then the distant “Hello? Hello?”

This was the cue for everyone to start talking – shouting, really – at once. There was a minimum two second delay as the signal travelled all the way along the cables lining the floor of the Atlantic, and all the way back. Normal conversation was impossible.

Soon some form of order was imposed. Each family member would speak briefly. My father would be watching the second hand on the noisy kitchen clock. Finally the phone would be handed to me, and I would panic, completely silent, succumbing to the pressure of the time. I would hear the distant voice of my Oma asking who was there. A gentle blow to the back of my head would elicit a “Merry Christmas Oma” from me, and the phone would be wrenched from my sweaty grip. My mother would speak briefly to her mother, would invariably start to cry. The second hand approaches the top of the clock – my father mouths “sorry” to my mother, and presses down on the metal cradle of the phone. The seven minute call is over. We would be exhausted. The effort, the stress, the ritual (ritual? I remember we actually had to get dressed up for the phone call!), the expense, but somehow it was worth it. The connection had been made. “Now it is Christmas,” my mother would say, smiling as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

What lengths we went to, to talk to the people we love. To hear their voice. To make that connection. But what about talking to God? How do we go about that? Well, prayer, of course. And if you are uncertain about prayer, about how and when and what to say, well, you're in good company. The disciples weren't sure either.

“Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” You'd think Peter, Andrew, James, John and the rest would know how to pray – good Jews all, they would have been praying from their earliest age; they would have had daily family prayers around the table, they would have had weekly prayers in Synagogue, they would have heard the majestic prayers in pilgrimages to Jerusalem, like the ones we read in the Psalms. You'd think, if anyone would know how to pray, it would be the disciples.

Stranger still, the disciples tell Jesus that John the Baptist taught his own disciples to pray. We don't have any remaining examples of just what John taught them, but the implication is that John taught his disciples to pray in a way different than they had been doing. How, I wonder? What did he teach them? I guess we'll never know.

But we do know what Jesus taught his disciples about prayer. We heard Luke's outline; Matthew gives us a bit more, as Jesus introduces what became known as The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:5-15 NIV):

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think 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.

So first of all, Jesus says, prayer isn't about putting on a show. Prayer isn't for showing other people how holy you are, and it isn't for showing God how long you can pray. Prayer is between you and God – prayer is like a conversation with a loving parent. It isn't about finding the right magic formula, or incantation, or combination of words. Prayer is about talking to God – to God, who knows you, who loves you, who wants nothing more than to be in relationship with you, His child.

Here's the thing about prayer: prayer isn't so much about reminding God that we are here. God knows we're here. Prayer is much more about reminding us that

God is here, which we often forget. That God is with us. That God is close. Prayer is about maintaining that relationship, that connection, that intimacy – that love.

I think that's what the disciples began to understand when they overheard Jesus praying. They heard a sense of intimacy. They heard love. They didn't hear Jesus going on and on with fancy phrases and words, trying to impress others, or building a false front of piety to try to impress God. They heard someone speaking from the heart, a prayer of intimacy, a prayer of love. "*Teach us to pray like that,*" they asked Jesus. And so he did. Here's the traditional version, as the NIV puts it:

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."*

"*Our Father in Heaven.*" Remember, when you pray, that you are not praying to some distant, angry, unknown God; you are not praying to an unreasonable, uncaring or preoccupied earthly father; you are praying to your heavenly Father, a Father who made you, who knows you, who provides for you, who loves you. It is a prayer of intimacy. A prayer of relationship. A prayer of love. You don't have to be afraid to pray. You don't have to be good enough to pray. You don't have to find a magic combination of words. You are praying to someone who loves you, to someone you love. Remember: we are the ones initiating the prayer, but it was God who initiated the relationship. It is God who has reached out to us. Prayer is us reaching back.

"*Hallowed be your name,*" or, "*may your name always be kept holy.*" God is to us a loving Father, a caring parent, but at the same time, God is God, creator of the universe, the God to whom King David prayed, "*Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours.*" When we pray, "*Hallowed by your name,*" we are saying, "May I live my life in the knowledge of who You are, may I live my life in such a way that brings glory to You."

As we live our lives day to day, if we do so in the consciousness of **who God is** – the God we call **our** God – surely we will try to live in such a way as to not bring disrepute to God's name, but instead to live up to the high title of "Christian." Many of us think, and correctly so, that "*Hallowed be your name*" means "*not taking the Lord's name in vain.*" And that's true; but it also means living in such a way that our words **and** our actions reflect respect for the name, for the person, of our God.

“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Our greatest hope – our greatest desire – is that our world will finally know hope, and peace, and joy, and love; when all the world will fully experience *“the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfilment and delight.”* That is the day for which we pray, and the principles by which we, as the children of God, seek to live in the here and now. That is what we pray. That is how we live, by the rules and standards and inspiration of the Kingdom of God, where hope and peace, joy and love reign, *“on earth as it is in heaven.”*

“Give us today our daily bread.” Or, “May we have what we need to make it through this day.” Food, water, companionship, healing, purpose, ability, consolation, forgiveness, strength; may we have what we need to make it through this day, and may we realise that everything we have comes from you, our Heavenly Father. And so may we live in gratitude for the sustenance God provides, content with and grateful for the needs of the day.

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” When we hear “debt,” we think money. When Jesus says “debt,” he’s thinking beyond finances. He’s thinking of those things we do (or fail to do) which harm or demean others or ourselves; things which bring hurt to the loving heart of God. Other translations say “trespasses.” Newer translations, such we earlier read, say, “sins.” Offenses. Hurts. Wrongs. God, in incalculable mercy and grace, through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, has made forgiveness possible for us. We can have a fresh start. We can put our past sins, offenses, wrongs behind us. The slate between us and God can be and is wiped clean, as we come to God in repentance, in sorrow for our sins, in determination to live as the children of God. *“Forgive us our debts,”* we pray.

But our forgiveness is incomplete if we fail to extend forgiveness to others. Jesus is serious about this; Matthew concludes the Lord’s Prayer with these words of Jesus: *“For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”* The refusal to forgive others actually prevents us from experiencing the benefit and freedom of our own forgiveness. How can our hearts be filled with God’s love, if they are filled with hatred or resentment of another? How can we experience the release of forgiveness, if we refuse to let go of the grudges and resentments we harbour against others? Refusing to forgive, says Jesus, is refusing to be forgiven. It is preventing forgiveness. *“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”* It is a challenge, but it is also a release; a release from the power of hatred, resentment, revenge.

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Don’t understand this as asking God to not lead you into a trap – the Scriptures make clear, repeatedly, that God is not the one who tempts - but instead understand it as a sincere request to not find ourselves or place ourselves in situations which lead us into sin or despair. I find St. Paul’s paraphrase of this very helpful; he put it like this (1 Corinthians 10:13): *The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.* When my path – my actions, my decisions – are leading me into situations where I am in danger of succumbing to sin or despair, help me, O Lord, to change my path – and give me the strength to overcome.

In short, the Lord’s Prayer reminds us of who God is, and who we are in relation to God; it reminds us of our hope that God will set things right, and that we can live in a way that reflects God’s justice and goodness in the here and now; it reminds us that our most basic needs are met by God; that we are offered forgiveness, and challenged to forgive; and that no matter the situation in which we find ourselves, God will help us to overcome.

Most of all, the Lord’s Prayer teaches us that prayer is a simple thing – as simple and as necessary as staying in touch with those we love. As with those phone calls to Germany – it wasn’t so much about what was actually said, as it was about connecting with one another. It was the fact that we were only able to do so, so infrequently, that the communication suffered. Don’t let this happen between you and God. Don’t pray so infrequently that it is a worrisome or stressful experience, where you’re uncertain if anything got through at all.

Way back in 2018 I challenged you to incorporate the Lord’s Prayer into your daily life, and to do so meaningfully by using each line (or “petition”) of the prayer as a guide. Like this:

- **Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name**
 - *Begin by thanking God for the gift of a new day.*
 - *Think of how you will live your life today as a child of God.*
 - *How will I hallow God’s name today?*
- **Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**
 - *Say a prayer for the needs of the world.*
 - *Ask God to help you act in ways that would be in accordance with God’s will.*

- **Give us today our daily bread.**
 - *Thank God for the most basic of needs which will be met today.*
 - *Pray that God will help meet those deep needs you might have which are unfulfilled.*
 - *Pray for the basic needs of others – and how God can help you to help meet them.*
- **Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors**
 - *Think of those things in your life which require forgiveness. Ask God’s forgiveness, and determine to change your behaviour.*
 - *Think of people from whom you need to seek forgiveness.*
 - *Think of people against whom you have resentment or carry a grudge. Pray that God will help you forgive them.*
- **Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.**
 - *Pray that God will help you avoid situations where you tend to succumb to sin. Ask for strength to overcome.*
- **For yours is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory forever and ever.**
 - *A good time to remind yourself that God, not you, is in charge! Place yourself in God’s care.*

You can use this framework of prayer in the morning as you approach the day, and at night, as you reflect upon the day. Perhaps repeating the Lord’s Prayer in the middle of the day will prove a helpful reminder of this larger, more reflective form. And here’s the thing; as prayer becomes more a part of who we are, the hope, peace, joy and love of God takes greater root in our lives. We think of prayer as a source of strength in trouble, of comfort in distress, or a cry for help in time of need. It is all those things; but it is also a wellspring of joy. Paul, who knew what it was to pray, said, *“I’m thankful for all of you every time I pray, and it’s always a prayer full of joy (Philippians 1:4).”* That can be us. That can be you and me.

I’ll never forget those transatlantic calls. I’ll never forget my father holding my mother afterwards, saying, “See? They’re not so far away after all. And they know you love them.”

What better time than Christmas to tell God you love him? To say “thank you” to God for the gift of Jesus? What better time to remember God drawing close to us, through the baby in the manger? And what better way to do so, than to make an effort to pray – each day, every day – and so reach out to God, who reached out to us, in Jesus Christ? Prayer reminds us – teaches us – assures us, that God is not so far away after all. And he loves us. And he fills our heart with joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.