

Teach Us to Pray Liturgically

A sermon on Luke 11:1-13

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

The disciples ask their teacher, Lord, teach us to pray.

Teach us to pray as John taught his disciples.

Now maybe they were asking for a verbatim prayer to memorize and recite

- maybe John the Baptist had perhaps taught his disciples such a prayer.

Could be. If that's the case, we don't know,

and we don't have whatever that prayer might be.

Sometimes I think we tend to assume that was what was asked,

since "we Christians" already "know" the story:

disciples ask "Lord teach us to pray." Jesus says pray this prayer.

Disciples prayed that prayer, and centuries, millennia later,

we still pray that same prayer, pretty much unaltered.

"Obviously" when they asked "Lord teach us to pray"

Jesus understood in their request a need for prescribed words.

But there is more to this exchange with the disciples...

Consider for a moment that when they asked "Lord teach us to pray"

they meant not "teach us a prayer" but rather

"teach us to do this thing that you do."

Prayer is clearly effective for you, so you must be doing something right, so, teach us.

And don't just teach us how, but teach us to *actually do it*.

That's a different question altogether.

Jesus responds with the prayer as has been established.

But he also says some other stuff.

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Stuff about, annoying friends who demand bread in the middle of the night,
and kids asking for eggs and getting scorpions ...

In ideal circumstances, parents try to do the right thing for their children.
I for one have never asked my parents for an egg and received a scorpion.
Perhaps even children blessed with really good parents would disagree on this at times:
I asked for ice cream, why are you giving me Brussels sprouts!?! hmp. The nerve!
It can sure seem at times, looking at our world,
that God answers prayers with scorpions of making matters even worse,
without any clear benefit to us,
but Jesus assures us that this is not how to interpret those situations.

I have a professor at Saint John's that likes to remind his students that:
If God *ever* comes across looking worse than the average human being,
your theology just might have gone screwy somewhere.
And that is what I hear in this passage too:
the promise that God is better than the best parent, and better than the best of friends.
If we can manage to do the right thing once in a while, out of human decency,
at least with regards to our own children,
then God can probably do even better, and he will.

It is this assurance that gives us the confidence to pray,
and bring all of our cares to him, knowing he will do right by us.

In preparing for this morning's worship,
I kept coming back to this aspect of the Lord's Prayer
– that it is a set prayer that is memorized and recited.

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And I kept thinking that there is something to doing so.

That led to today's experiment with worship.

Instead of writing my own prayers

(or going through a million sources trying to find something
that would reinforce the main story or theme),

I would try sticking with what our liturgical books recommends.

And I think I may have been on to something,

that there is a legitimate place for using prescribed prayers.

I certainly learned a few things from the experience.

For one, it's been surprisingly humbling,

even very tempting to not obey even though that was sort of the point.

It's *not* about me or what I would do if I ran the zoo.

It was probably good to remember that I don't have to control everything.

There were some things I was and am slightly uncomfortable doing.

Other things I couldn't believe that I actually am *allowed* to do that
– in a Presbyterian church?! Cool.

I think I like my church more than I did before

for having explored this more prescribed worship style,

though I am thankful this isn't required or set in stone.

Another thing I got from this was the wisdom

to pray for things I normally wouldn't think to.

Following formulas does help to guide us

along spiritually beneficial and theologically sound lines.

What you get out of it is up to you. And I thank you for humoring me this morning.

Now, according to the commentaries on this book, I'm not supposed to say Amen, so...

*Now to the One, who by the power at work within us,
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*