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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/30/2011, Midweek Lent 3: The Lord's Prayer
Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4

PRAYER OF THE DAY, LENT 3

P Eternal Lord, your kingdom has broken into our troubled world through the life, death, and resurrection of your Son. Help us to hear your Word and obey it, so that we become instruments of your redeeming love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

HOLY SCRIPTURE Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4

Introduction from Pastor Fryer

You might find it interesting to hear a bit about the *text* of the Lord's Prayer. As far as I can tell, the version we are used to reciting here at Immanuel does not correspond exactly to any of the standard English translations. It is closest to the *King James Version* of Matthew 6, which is part of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. The passage goes this way:

⁹After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. ¹⁰Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread. ¹²And forgive us our debts¹, as we forgive our debtors. ¹³And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. (Matthew 6:9-13, KJV)

Now, let me point out two things about this translation. First, it uses the word "debts" instead of the word we are used to, which is "trespasses." Judging by the underlying Greek, I would say that the King James Version is right in this matter. "Debts" is the better word.

The second thing to notice is that the King James Version includes the doxology: "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen." However, this seems to be an invention of the King James Version. The Greek does not have

¹ ὀφείλημα *opheilema* {of-i'-lay-mah} Meaning: 1) that which is owed 1a) that which is justly or legally due, a debt 2) metaph. offence, sin

the doxology. At least the Nestle Greek Text I've had since Seminary does not have the doxology.

This is interesting to me because long experience with leading funerals has led me to distinguish the Catholics from the Lutherans by the fact that the Catholics stop after the seventh petition, while we Lutherans forge ahead with the doxology. I think the Catholics might have the better case here. They tend to add in the doxology a few sentences later.

So, let me read the prayer again, this time using the Revised Standard Version. This version tries to follow the King James Version as faithfully as it can except where modern scholarship has pressed for a more original translation. So, here is the RSV:

⁹Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
¹⁰Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread; ¹²And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors; ¹³And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. (Matthew 6:9-13, RSV)

There is no doxology in this version.

Next, let's take a look at the prayer in St. Luke's version. Here is the King James Version of the Prayer:

¹And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples. ²And he said unto them, When ye pray, say, Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. ³Give us day by day our daily bread. ⁴And forgive us our sins²; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. (Luke 11:1-4, KJV)

Now, it seems to me that this King James Version gets one thing right and one thing wrong here. It is right to use the word "sins" instead of "trespasses" or "debts." The underlying Greek word, ἁμαρτία is usually translated "sins." But what is wrong is that the King James Version again invents something: it adds in the seventh petition, "but deliver us from evil."

So, the version of the Lord's Prayer we usually use here at Immanuel turns out to be an amalgam of various translations.

² ἁμαρτία hamartia

Let me read one more translation for you. This one comes from Luther's *Large Catechism*. This is how the Kolb/Wengert translation of Luther's German puts our dear Lord's Prayer. It contains the classic elements of the prayer: the address and all seven petitions:

Our Father, you who are in heaven, may your name be hallowed. May your kingdom come. May your will come about also on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And remit our debt, as we remit our debtors. And lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. Amen.

Now, let us put these textual matters aside and turn our minds toward more spiritual things. You *know* the Lord's Prayer. What I want in this evening's sermon is that we will admire that prayer even more and gladly pray it and other prayers too.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples. ²And he said unto them, When ye pray, say, *Our Father* which art in heaven... (Luke 11:1-2, KJV)

How wonderful are the opening words of our Lord's prayer! How gracious they are and even mysterious in their goodness. Indeed, I think we can see in these opening two words a kind of foreshadowing of the whole Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. For one who invites others to pray *in this manner* is one who so loves that he is likely even to die for others.

We are accustomed to the Lord's Prayer. It sounds familiar and even musical to our ears. Yet pause for a moment to consider how astonishing the opening words of the prayer are: Our Father! These are surprising and mysterious words because, truth be told, the heavenly Father is not *our* Father, but Jesus's Father. Oh, blessed confusion! Jesus looks around at his scraggly band of disciples. They have come to him seeking instruction in prayer. So Jesus teaches them. He teaches them to address the Almighty God of Israel, the very Maker of heaven earth, as "our Father." Indeed, the word of address is intimate and trusting, like "Poppa" or "Daddy."

But, again, he is not *our* Poppa. He is the heavenly Poppa of Jesus, who is the only begotten Son of the Father, begotten before all worlds and before all time. For some reason, Jesus invites his disciples to address *his* Father as *our* Father. The cause of this is love. It seems to be the case of that for Jesus, there is no longer a home sweet home for him, nor even a heavenly Father for him, that does not include his disciples as well.

Err long, Jesus will put this conviction into action. His disciples might abandon him as he draws closer and closer to the cross, but he will never abandon them. He can as little deny them as you or I could deny our own brother or sister. They might disappoint us, they might frustrate us, but they forever remain our brother, our sister. Likewise, when the only way forward for humanity was for Jesus to die, then die he did. The cross, I say, was foreshadowed in these two opening words, "Our Father..."

Last week, I lifted up what I take to be a brilliant insight of Martin Luther. It concerned the relationship between the Ten Commandments and the Creed. Luther argues that it is easier for us to obey the Ten Commandments if we will bear in mind the Creed. The idea is that it is easier to obey any commandment if you trust the commander, and the Creed teaches us that our divine Commander is entirely trustworthy.

Now, Luther extends his brilliance in this third part of the Catechism: the Lord's Prayer. Luther believes the same thing about prayer that he believed about the Creed: that is, he believed that a life of prayer makes it easier for us to obey the Ten Commandments.

Why is that? It is because the world vexes us and the devil tempts us, with the result that we lose our feel for the Creed and for the goodness of our great Commander. Do you recognize this? Does your day sometimes so frustrate you that you could murmur to yourself, "I hate everybody in sight! Just leave me alone." Well, when you are feeling that way, it is hard to be cheerful about God. Prayer, then, is crucial because prayer is the means by which we crawl back toward the Gospel. It is the God-granted instrument for turning our hearts and minds back toward holy things.

Let me now share with you some of the great passages in Luther's *Large Catechism* about prayer. My first passage concerns the logic of prayer -- what I have just been referring to. Luther believes that we must pray because there are so many forces in life that want to drag us away from faith, and if we lose our faith, it is hard to obey the commandments. So, here is the opening paragraph in Luther's *Large Catechism* in his discussion of prayer:

We have now heard what we are to do and believe. The best and most blessed life consists of these things. Now follows the third part, how we are to pray. We are in such a situation that no one can keep the Ten Commandments perfectly, even though he or she has begun to believe. Besides, the devil, along with the world and our flesh, resists them with all his power. Consequently, nothing is so necessary as to call upon God incessantly and to drum into his ears our prayer that he may give, preserve, and increase in us faith and the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments and remove all that stands in our way and hinders us in this regard.

For Luther, that we should be people of prayer is an urgent matter. He believed that the Second Commandment, about the holy use of God's name, requires us to be people of prayer and that this is no joke:

This is the first and most important point, that all our prayers must be based on obedience to God, regardless of our person, whether we are sinners or righteous people, worthy or unworthy. We must understand that God is not joking, but that he will be angry and punish us if we do not pray, just as he punishes all other kinds of disobedience. Nor will he allow our prayers to be futile or lost, for if he did not intend to answer you, he would not have ordered you to pray and backed it up with such a strict commandment.

Furthermore, it is with God's command to pray as it with all his commands: they are motivated by our Lord's love for us. He commands us to pray because he knows that we live in a dangerous world, and he wants our prayers to intervene on behalf of this world, to make it a better place:

This we must know, that all our safety and protection consists in prayer alone. For we are far too weak against the devil and all his might and forces arrayed against us, trying to trample us underfoot. Therefore we must keep this in mind and grasp the weapons with which Christians are to arm themselves for resisting the devil. What do you think has accomplished such great results in the past, parrying the counsels and plots of our enemies and checking their murderous and seditious designs by which the devil expected to crush us, and the gospel as well, *except that the prayers of a few godly people intervened like an iron wall* on our side? Otherwise they would have seen a far different drama: the devil would have destroyed all Germany in its own blood.

So, Luther believed that prayer is not optional for a Christian. God commands us to pray and we stand in urgent need of prayer.

Next, Luther teaches that God promises to *grant* our prayers. For Luther, this is nothing so light as God promising to *hear* our prayer. No, Luther takes the Bible at its word and believes that God will grant our prayers:

In the second place, what ought to impel and arouse us to pray all the more is the fact that God has made and affirmed a promise: that what we

pray is a certain and sure thing. As he says in Psalm 50[:15*], “Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you,” and Christ says in the Gospel in Matthew 7[:7–8*], “Ask, and it will be given you,” etc. . . . “For everyone who asks receives.” Such promises certainly ought to awaken and kindle in our hearts a longing and love for prayer.

I suggest that this is a mystery concerning the Holy Spirit. Let us recall that wonderful passage in St. Paul concerning prayer, about how we “do not know how to pray as we ought”:

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27, RSV)

If our prayers are going to be granted, as Luther trusts they will be, it must be because the Holy Spirit prays along with us and intercedes for us. I picture this as the Holy Spirit taking our poor words, which are often misguided even about the true needs of our own heart, and improving those words for us, so that they can be granted by the Heavenly Father. We, then, can pray with confidence because the Holy Spirit will intercede for us and go the very heart of the matter.

Finally, Luther says that we ought to be people of prayer because we cannot plead ignorance as to how to pray:

Furthermore, we should be encouraged and drawn to pray because, in addition to this commandment and promise, God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words and approach we are to use. In this way we see how deeply concerned he is about our needs, and we should never doubt that such prayer pleases him and will assuredly be heard. So this prayer is far superior to all others that we might devise ourselves. For in that case our conscience would always be in doubt, saying, “I have prayed, but who knows whether it pleases him or whether I have hit upon the right form and mode?” Thus there is no nobler prayer to be found on

¹⁵ Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” Psalm 50:15 (NRSV)

⁷ Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Matthew 7:7–8 (NRSV)

earth,¹⁶⁷ for it has the powerful testimony that God loves to hear it. This we should not trade for all the riches in the world.

I would add about this that not only does God love to hear the Lord's Prayer, but also he loves to hear the Psalms, and I commend to you that you do as I do and try to build your prayers also on the Psalms.

I want to end this praise of prayer by sharing with you one of the most important suggestions about prayer that I have heard in an awfully long time. It was mentioned by theologian Robert W. Jenson in a lecture last summer, and it brought tears to Carol's eyes, she was so moved by it.

Jenson was discussing what is called the "Christological interpretation" of the traditional predicates of God. One of those traditional predicates is that God is "omniscient." That is, we believe that God is "all-knowing."

But Jenson noted that we should try to understand the idea of "omniscience" in a way that goes beyond that of the philosophers or this world's reason. He urges that we should try to connect God's supreme knowledge with Jesus Christ and with those who are "in Christ."

I don't know whether Jenson meant for Carol and me to rush to the conclusion we did, but here it is: We have come to believe that we should pray *as if* we are thereby contributing to God's omniscience. How, then, does God know that our brother Jeff stands in need of prayer? Because we are going to tell him, this evening, in our prayers! Of course, other people are going to be informing God too about the needs of this earth. Indeed, tens of thousands of prayers can be ascending to God this evening, letting him know what we feel he ought to know and daring to give God our opinion about things, as he invites us to do:

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8, NRSV)

Altogether, Luther believed that Christians should be people of prayer. In Christ, we should climb up onto God's lap, as if we were little children, and let him know how we feel about things. The final word is his, naturally, yet he wants to hear our requests and opinions, and we can trust his judgment about how to handle everything, for he is trustworthy, even our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁶⁷ The 1538 Wittenberg edition of the Catechism and the German Book of Concord (1580) add: "than the daily Lord's Prayer."

Hymn following the sermon, LBW 439 *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*