

Sermons from St. Thomas

A Persistent God

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, 24 July 2016. Hosea 1:2-10, Psalm 85, Colossians 2:6-15, Luke 11:1-13.

Quite a lot happened over the past few weeks while I was on vacation. Alton Sterling and Philando Castille were both killed by police. Police officers Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, Lorne Ahrens, and transit officer Brent Thompson were killed in Dallas, with seven others wounded. Officers Montrell Jackson, Matthew Gerald, and Brad Garafola were killed in Baton Rouge, and three others wounded. A truck driver plowed into a crowd in Nice on Bastille Day, killing 84 and wounding 202. A shooter killed shoppers in Munich. ISIS claimed responsibility for a bombing in Kabul that killed more than 80 and wounded 260. There was an attempted coup in Turkey. The situation in South Sudan continued to go from bad to worse. The Republican National Convention met in Cleveland, and coverage of that event highlighted deep divisions in our country and fear for our future. Coverage of the Democratic National Convention next week will likely do the same. That's just a short list. I have not watched a TV for two and a half weeks, so I may have missed some things. I did attend several church services while away, and it was clear that the worship leaders there were watching the news. Many times I heard people in England pray specifically for the US in this time of turmoil.

When I first heard of the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille, I was so numb it was hard to know how to pray. Each succeeding tragedy added to that sense of pain and confusion. Over the past few weeks it has been hard to know how to pray in the midst of so much confusion. Perhaps that is true for you as well.

So I wonder if the disciples who asked Jesus to teach them to pray felt something similar. They, too, lived in a time of deep division and fear. They, too, lived under the threat of violence. They, too, lived under political instability.

So in asking Jesus to teach them to pray, maybe they weren't simply asking for his preferred protocol. It was common in that day for disciples to ask a teacher to give them specific prayers to pray. The prayers would unite the community together. But maybe, in addition to a prescribed prayer, they were asking something more basic and heartfelt. "Lord, how in the world are we supposed to pray?"

Luke's gospel gives us the short form of Jesus's answer. The long form, the one we quote so often, is from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. But Luke drills down to the high points. *Pray then in this way:*

Hallowed be your name. This is a statement of submission. The prayer of Jesus begins with an acknowledgment of the holiness of God above all else. In praying this way, we promise to put no other entity in the place of God – not ourselves, not our possessions, not our family, not our nation. We can't say me first, mine first, family first, or America first, and also say Hallowed be your name. The prayer of Jesus starts with submission to God.

Your kingdom come. In submitting to God, we submit also to God's ways. God's kingdom is code language in Jesus's time for a vision of safety and abundance and caring for all people. This prayer asks that the peace and blessing of heaven come to this earth for all people. In praying it, we commit ourselves to being part of God's vision for the world.

Give us this day our daily bread. This is a prayer for sustenance and strength. It is collective, not individual. We do not ask for our needs only but also for the needs of others. Praying as Jesus taught us means caring for the common good.

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. We acknowledge our need for forgiveness and mercy and promise to be people who give mercy to others. Indeed, our forgiveness is linked to the forgiveness we offer.

Save us from the time of trial. This is a prayer for the future. Whatever fear or evil we may sense lies ahead, we seek God's help. We trust ourselves into God's keeping.

The prayer Jesus gave his disciples is a helpful prayer in times of uncertainty and confusion. It calls us to trust and confidence and hope. That is why we memorize it, recite it, and teach it to our children.

But the Lord's Prayer is not simply a set of words to say by rote. Jesus gave his disciples so much more than words to say. He gave us a way to live – with trust in God rather than fear of others, submission to God rather than promotion of self. The Lord's Prayer is an agenda for Christian living.

So Jesus illustrated these words with a parable. Suppose you go to a friend at midnight seeking food for some guests. Your sleepy friend does not want to be bothered. But you are undeterred. You keep knocking at the door until finally the sleepy friend rises and reluctantly gives you what you need.

One way to read this is to say that even lazy humans will eventually give in to midnight demands, just to be rid of those who ask for help. Therefore, how much more, *how much more*, will the God who loves us listen to our cries for help. So ask and seek and knock. God's very name is holy, and God's reign in this world will come to pass. So pray and trust with all the persistence of a desperate host at midnight. Do not give up. That is how to pray.

But let's press this parable a little farther. Parables are like Mary Poppins's satchel. There is always something else to pull from the depths. So what if God is not the sleeping friend in this story? What if God is not the householder reluctantly awakened by our cries for help? What if, instead, God is the one doing the waking? Think about it this way. We are the guests who have taken up lodging in God's household. Tired from our journeys, weary of hatred and injustice and violence and division, hungry for righteousness, we have come to God's house to stay. And God will stop at nothing to provide for us. God will raise the kingdoms of this world from their sleep. They are sometimes reluctant to do what is right. They often don't want to be bothered with cries for help. They hesitate to share the riches of creation. But God is persistent. God will not stop knocking on the door until all are fed and justice is done. The love and compassion and zeal of God will wear them down. Even the most reluctant will do what is right. When we pray, we pray to a God who is that persistently good.

The psalmist believed in a persistent God.

¹⁰*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.*

¹¹*Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.*

¹²*The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.*

¹³*Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.*

Hosea also believed in a persistent God. Though the people had turned aside from God, though Hosea dramatized that turning in his own life by marrying a woman who would not be faithful to him, he knew God would not let the people go. *In the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God."*

God is persistently good. God does not mind disturbing the powers of this world and demanding that they do the right thing and provide for all. God does this for the good of the needy and for the good of the powerful. Everyone wins when mercy wins.

To pray, therefore, is not simply to recite a formula. It is to become what we pray. It is to join our voices with the voice of our persistently compassionate God who will not rest until the household is put right.

The prayer Jesus taught us to pray aligns us with God's persistence. When we pray it like we mean it, this prayer wakes us up at midnight and wears us down to mercy. Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us all this day our daily bread. Forgive us and help us forgive others. Do not bring us to the time of trial.

So keep praying. Pray persistently for an end to racism and division and fear. Pray persistently for police officers and first responders. Pray persistently for our enemies and all who wish harm on others. Pray persistently for our nation and our political process. Pray persistently for all who live under violence.

And if we pray in this way, the Holy Spirit will make us into what we pray – people of persistence, who wake up and wake up others and share the gifts of God with all God’s children.

Let us pray as Jesus taught us. *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

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