

“The Most Subversive Prayer You’ll Ever Offer”

Luke 11.1–13

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 29 July 2007

If there is one element that seems to appear in every service at Plymouth – whether it’s Sunday worship, a wedding, a funeral, or some special service – it is praying the words that Jesus taught his disciples: the Lord’s Prayer.

To be honest, it is one of my favorite prayers – and not just because I know it – but because it embodies the teachings of Jesus so well. But, we’ll get to that part later in the sermon.

It’s important to look at the opening of the prayer – to whom the prayer is addressed. It uses Jesus’ primary image of God. It isn’t a far-off, unreachable, untouchable, unknowable God. It is an intimate God, one whom he wants us to call “Daddy.” Does that mean that “father” has to be your primary image of God? No, it doesn’t mean that. But, if we take the historical Jesus seriously, we need to acknowledge that this was Jesus’ primary image. And it’s also clear that Jesus did not see himself as the object of worship. One of my UCC colleagues said recently that in the UCC congregation in which she was raised in the 1950s, it was clear that we *worship* God, but we *follow* Jesus.

When I was at Ring Lake Ranch a couple of weeks back, Jane Vennard, our course leader, asked if I would design a closing communion service for the group. And I decided to include the Lord’s Prayer. One of the participants said to me, “I can’t believe that churches still insist on perpetuating patriarchy by using the Lord’s Prayer.” On the one hand, I want to acknowledge the pain that was underlying what she said to me. Men have dominated the leadership of the church for two millennia, and in many parts of the church, they still do. (If you want an illustration of this, look at the organization of the one-billion-strong Roman Catholic church, which is organized like a medieval principality, and all the key players are men, from priests to bishops to cardinals to the pope.) But, on the other hand, I think that one can have an image of God as father without being patriarchal. Jesus himself set out to disrupt the norms of his society – eating with prostitutes, sinners, and tax collectors, the untouchables of his day – and both he and Paul included women in their inner circle of followers. And in our church today, we have multiple images of God, which reflect the richness of the biblical tradition. And we still include God the father among our inclusive images.

For me, personally, the image of God as father is my primary image, one that seems far more intimate than God as rock, refuge, or creator of the universe. And while I freely acknowledge that father is my primary image, I know that it isn’t everyone’s, which is why I insist that we use “inclusive language,” incorporating multiple images of God into our worship life as a congregation.

Okay, so those are the first two words of the prayer. (Obviously, we aren’t going to deal comprehensively with the whole thing...that will be a sermon series someday.)

There are two accounts of Jesus’ prayer in the gospels, the one you heard Harry read is from Luke, and the other is in the sixth chapter of Matthew’s gospel. It goes like this: **2**

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
 And do not bring us to the time of trial,
 but rescue us from the evil one.”

And then there is an explanatory postscript, clearly added by the gospel writer or by a later editor: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

So, if you wonder why most Congregationalists and Presbyterians use “debts,” it’s because it is used twice in Matthew’s version and once in Luke’s version (“Forgive us our sins as we ourselves forgive all those who are indebted to us.”) “Trespasses” doesn’t enter into the actual prayer itself, and I’m not sure why Catholics and Episcopalians include it.

Whether you hear it or not, there is a deep economic undercurrent in the prayer that Jesus offered. Forgiveness of debt is an aspect of Jewish observation in Leviticus, with the cancellation of debt and the freeing of slaves in the jubilee year every fifty years (following seven cycles of seven years), which fits into the seven year cycle of debt forgiveness and resting the land in the sabbatical system, and the weekly rest of the sabbath on the seventh day. While we don’t know if the ancient Israelites ever put Jubilee into practice in the way Leviticus outlines it, we do know that Jesus carried forth this idea of economic justice in the Lord’s Prayer. And you ask for it every week or every day, each time you pray, you are asking for God’s justice to be poured forth on you in the same manner that you express economic justice to those with whom you share the planet.

And that idea tends to subvert the dominant economic paradigm of our day: that the economically fittest will survive, that you get you’ve earned, that winner takes all, that you deserve to buy all that Madison Avenue is trying to sell you, and that if you don’t have health insurance it’s your own damned fault for not being self-supporting.

So, that does have something to say about things like buying fair-trade coffee, making socially responsible investments, decided whether or not to shop at national big box stores that sell goods at low prices, which they’re able to do because of low wages and poor working conditions for factory laborers in China and elsewhere in the developing world. And it also speaks to whether and how you invest your funds to be co-creators of the kingdom of God. Do you invest your earnings in a second home or do you make a choice to support mission and education? Do you put your money into international vacations or do you help to fund the construction of a new building at Plymouth? And maybe that’s not and either/or choice for you. Perhaps it’s a both/and.

To some of you that may sound harsh, and I’m not passing judgment, which is why I leave it to you to weigh the way you open doors for others, in the ways that you would have God open doors for you. Imagine if God extended grace to you in the same proportion you extended compassion to others...it would be a pretty tough deal, and I, for one, am glad that God’s grace is not something we have to earn, because I would not make out as well as I have.



So, I’ve tried to point out that all of us are economically subversive when we as for the forgiveness of debt. But, that’s just the tip of the iceberg.

There is something that we pray for twice in the Lord’s Prayer: “thy **kingdom** come, thy will be done on earth...as it is in Heaven.” “Thine is the **kingdom**, the power, and the glory forever.” Now, you may ask yourself what is so countercultural about that.

The Greek word *basileia* is translated into English as kingdom, and in an effort to avoid the word “king,” a male image of God, some translate it as “reign,” which isn’t bad. Sharon and I were talking about that one day, and we decided that both “kingdom” and “reign” lack the edginess of *basileia*. (For Jesus, to pray for the kingdom meant that God was in charge, not Caesar, and that our allegiance was to God’s reign, not Rome’s empire.) So, she suggested a term that is more current for us, that has the edginess of *basileia*: **regime**. And when we pray for God’s kingdom to come, ***we are praying for regime change!***

In addressing God’s new world order, I am going to turn to one of my favorite American theologians of the early 20th century, Walter Rauschenbusch, the guiding intellectual of the Social Gospel movement. His little volume, *Prayers of the Social Awakening*, is one of the books in my library that is dearest to me. It was published by the UCC’s own Pilgrim Press in 1909. The introduction of this volume is called “The Social Meaning of the Lord’s Prayer.”

Hear these words penned nearly a hundred years ago: In praying for the kingdom, Jesus’ words, “express his yearning faith in the possibility of a reign of God on earth in which his name shall be hallowed and his will be done. They look for to the ultimate perfection of the common life of humanity on this earth, and pray for the divine revolution which is to bring that about.

“There is no request here that we be saved from earthiness and go to heaven which has been the great object of churchly religion. We pray here that heaven may be duplicated on earth through the moral and spiritual transformation of humanity, both in its personal units and its corporate life. No form of religion has ever interpreted this prayer aright which did not have a loving understanding for the plain daily relations of men [and women], and a living faith in their possible spiritual nobility.

“And no man [or woman] has outgrown the crude selfishness of religious immaturity who has not followed Jesus in setting this desire for the social salvation of all [hu]mankind ahead of all personal desires. The desire for the Kingdom outranks everything else in religion.”

“The Lord’s Prayer is the great prayer of social Christianity. It is charged with what we call ‘Social Consciousness.’ . . . It is not the property of those whose chief religious aim is to pass through an evil world in safety, leaving the world’s evil unshaken. Its dominating thought is the moral and religious transformation of [hu]mankind in all its social relations. It was left us by Jesus, the great initiator of the Christian revolution.”¹

We are praying for regime change every Sunday morning. We are pledging our allegiance to the kingdom of God, rather than to the American flag or to the Roman Empire.

I see Plymouth as being one outpost of God’s regime here on earth, among millions of others, but with a special calling. Last Thursday, a woman stopped by my office to talk. She was raised in a Southern Baptist church and now attends a large Pentecostal church here in town, and her 18-year-old son has come out as gay. When she asked if anyone in their 3- or 4-thousand-member church had experience with having gay kids, she was told by the staff that there were *none* that they knew of. (There is something ironic that a congregation whose motto is “Let Love Live” is unable to accept that they have members whose children have the capacity to love persons of the same sex.) I give thanks to God that people in Fort Collins are starting to know that Plymouth

¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Prayers of the Social Awakening*. (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1909), pp. 18-23.

is an Open and Affirming congregation and that it is possible to be gay, Christian, and loved fully by God. For most Christians, that is a subversive message.

So, we pray for economic justice, for regime change, and for overturning the conventional wisdom of most of the church. And sometimes I fear that we say Jesus' words by rote and that they lose their edginess, the radicalness, their subversive quality. One thing that I do to remind myself physically is to make the sign of the cross on my palm as we pray for the kingdom twice in the prayer. It's just a little reminder that we are called to be co-creators of the kingdom with our heart, soul, and strength.

For many people, kinesthetic (or bodily) intelligence is more powerful than linguistic intelligence – the mode through which we often pray. And one of the things I learned from Jane Vennard at Ring Lake Ranch was a body prayer that is used during the Lord's Prayer. So, let's close the sermon with that. I'll lead you through the movements once, and then we can do it together.

Movements for the Lords Prayer

Our Father: *Hands out in front, palms up, waist high*

Who art in heaven: *Hands raised as if to heaven*

Hallowed be thy name: *Hands pressed together in traditional prayer position*

Thy kingdom come: *Right hand reaches out to the side and scoops inward*

Thy will be done: *Left hand reaches out to the side and scoops inward*

On earth: *Palms down, waist high, moving as if playing in the dirt*

As it is in heaven: *Palms upward at waist height because heaven is here as well as above*

Give us this day our daily bread: *Hands stretched out in front, cupped to receive*

And forgive us our trespasses: *Right hand out straight to the side at shoulder level*

As we forgive those who trespass against us: *Same movement with left hand*

Lead us not into temptation: *Hands above head with wrists crossed as if bound*

But deliver us from evil: *Break hands open as if being freed from bondage*

For thine is the kingdom: *Hands upturned at waist level*

The power: *Hands at shoulder level, palms facing out with fingers spread*

And the glory forever: *Hands raise and shake, trembling as if making shooting stars*

Amen: *Hands pressed together in traditional prayer position, head bowed.*

— Jane Vennard with thanks to Rita Burgland