

Five Petitions

At the 2018 Soccer World Cup in Russia there was a clear spike in the use of Google Translate as fans chatted with merchants and fellow fans from around the world. The words for "stadium" and "beer" were in particularly high demand.

These apps are getting better, but they aren't totally reliable yet. 20% of those surveyed said the app often gave mangled or silly sentences. A warning sign read "Blasting in Progress." Google translated it, "Workers Exploding."

It's complicated. As one technician noted, "Machine translation is much more complex than pure pattern recognition. People use different words to express the same thing, or one word can have multiple meanings, depending on the situation."

I can go them one better: communication is no slam dunk, even when we're speaking the same language. *If we have trouble communicating with other humans, how can we hope to express our thoughts and needs to the infinite God?*

LUKE 11:1-4, 9-13 (NRSV) *He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."*²*He said to them, "When you pray, say:*

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ *Give us each day our daily bread.*

⁴ *And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.*

And do not bring us to the time of trial."

...⁹*"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given*

you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Hebrew Prophets commonly taught their disciples "a" prayer. We Protestants (especially more conservative Protestants) prefer "prayers from the heart:" by which is usually meant praying extemporaneously—spontaneously. In Baptist churches where I grew up, a written prayer was scandalous. The implication was that written or memorized prayers don't come from the heart.

Jesus and the other Hebrew prophets didn't have that rule. It was common practice for them to teach their disciples "a" prayer.

I'm going to stick with today's Gospel Lection for a while. I'm beginning a series of five sermons based on Luke's version of what we call "The Lord's Prayer".

In Luke's Gospel, the prayer life of Jesus is a major theme. As you read through his Gospel, over and over you come across phrases like the one that opens our text for this morning: "He was praying in a certain place..." "Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God" (6:12); "Once when Jesus was praying alone..." (9:18); "Then he withdrew from them

about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed..." (22:41).

I have issues with the phrase, "Prayer Works". It implies that our prayers make things happen: prayer is a tool we use to "get what we want." Magic words.

I prefer, "prayer is effective". Effective prayer doesn't depend on our methods or our sincerity or the depth of our faith, but on a listening Father who is more anxious to give us what we need than we are to receive it (which explains that other frivolous saying, "Be careful what you pray for. You might get it.")

Effective prayer brings our lives—individually and corporately—into alignment with the presence and will of God: it trusts a loving Father who, again, is more willing to give us what we need than we are to receive it. And I'm working on a sixth sermon to close the series. It will take a close look at Jesus' use of the term, "Father," and how that relates to us as we struggle to leave no person or group of people out—to be inclusive—with our language.

Effective prayer seeks first the kingdom of God and trusts that in so doing everything we need will be supplied. Effective prayer acknowledges that too often we confuse what we want with what we need.

Last week we looked at Luke's story of two sisters: Martha and Mary. Martha was bent out of shape because she was "distracted by her many tasks" and Mary wouldn't help. Jesus told Martha to "chill." "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset by many things. Only one thing is needed..."

In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for that "one thing"—to pray for their true needs to be met. The prayer is totally petitionary: no adoration or praise, no closing doxology as in Matthew; no thanksgiving or confession: just five petitions. Today we tackle the first: ...hallowed be your name.

In the original language it's in the imperative mood, which is a command. I don't recall noticing that before. The same is true with the next petition: "Your kingdom come." Is Jesus teaching his disciples to give commands to God?

I spent all morning and half the afternoon Tuesday trying to resolve that question. I thought, "It's got to be in the subjunctive mood," which would soften this whole 'command' issue; but I couldn't confirm that. I finally emailed my seminary professor, Gene Boring, and here is his response. "Yes, it is imperative, which is no problem when speaking to God, since 'entreaty, request, petition' is also a function of the imperative." Not nearly as complicated as I was making it.

I share this simply to reaffirm that serious study of Scripture is not easy. It's more than simply reading an English version and understanding it. Which English version? They're all different. We need access to the original languages, either by learning them (be my guest!), or by using resources that use those languages.

“Hallowed be your name...” I will use the word, “holy:” may your name become holy—consecrated, revered, worshiped. To be holy is to be set aside—acknowledged as different—on a higher plane. My question is, “How is God’s name made holy?”

Let’s look at what holy is *not*: a 4th-century book of catechism, discovered in Alexandria, Egypt, links this petition with ROMANS 2: 24. Paul is quoting ISAIAH 52:5: *“The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”* Whoa! We pray that God’s name be made holy. The ancient prophet, Jesus, Paul and even 4th century church fathers imply that where God’s name is not holy, it is because the community of God’s people has not lived in a way that demonstrates God’s holiness.

It’s a harsh indictment; and the shoe doesn’t fit everyone. To state it in a more positive way, the connection with Romans 2:24 suggests that when we pray, “May your name become Holy,” we acknowledge that as children of God we are called to take dominion over the brokenness in the world and to live counter to that brokenness so that the world can see God’s holiness through us.

What would it look like if God’s name were made holy in our neighborhood? And this has been a difficult study for me, spiritually and emotionally, because it has led me through my own brokenness:

If I pray for the hungry and needy of the world, I can feel pretty good about myself, especially if I also give some money to an agency that feeds the hungry. I can feel good about myself, as long as the problem is caused by someone else: if I can blame the government, the big corporations, the warring factions in some other part of the world, or even if I blame the victim and say that poverty and hunger are the result of laziness and irresponsibility. Then I can feel pretty good about myself for helping someone else in my prayers and with my gifts.

But the reality is more like that 1970s poster that said, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” When Jesus teaches us to pray, “May your name become Holy,” I repeat: he is calling us to live counter to the brokenness in the world, so that the world can see God’s holiness through us. But first, we must acknowledge the brokenness.

In Luke’s version of the beatitudes, Jesus said, *“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”* Walter Brueggemann writes that in saying this, Jesus does not mean to sit around and sob. He means rather *“to raise our voice for the grief of the world, a grief that is the very grief of God over every Jerusalem that does not know the things that make for peace. It is the rumbling of God on behalf of the hungry when there is in fact enough food. It is the indignation of God on behalf of the poor when there is in fact enough to go around of housing and education and justice. It is the groan of God on behalf of the raped earth, when we would rather laugh in our devouring than to repent of our wasteful coveting. It is the slow, teasing hammering of God of plowshares and pruning hooks while the world rushes to*

*the madness of swords and spears.*¹

It's difficult to take ownership of my participation in the brokenness of the world—to see that my brokenness contributes to the brokenness of others.

In that 4th-century catechism found in Alexandria there is commentary that those praying, "...hallowed be your name..." are not the holy ones praying that others would get their act together. We all contribute to the mess: we are called to participate in its solution. "May your name become Holy," is a petition that we and the whole world might be healed of our blindness to the brokenness that has become our world—a petition that our lives might demonstrate God's name as it really is: Holy.

Prayer Slide

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. *A Gospel of Hope* (pp. 127-128). Presbyterian Publishing. Kindle Edition.