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*The Prayer Jesus Taught:
"Give us this day our daily bread."*

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Luke 12:13-24

Our Lenten exploration of the prayer Jesus taught has prompted a lot of response. I'm hearing from many of you, which is great. It's like a dialogue. That happens when we peel back layers of an essential and powerful part of our faith.

One church member told me he still remembers a sermon series on the prayer Jesus taught, delivered from this pulpit by Don Meisel more than three decades ago. Some have said they intend to continue using traditional language – *Father, kingdom, thy, thine*. Others say they are using altered vocabulary – *Father/Mother, reign, realm, you, yours*. Someone handed me a worship bulletin with her preferred terms penciled in above the scratched out printed words. Still others have sent prayers that follow the basic outline of what Jesus taught yet with entirely new wording.

We may hear these different versions in worship as we say the prayer together, and that's fine. It won't be the first time. Haven't we all noticed when we say this prayer at a Minnesota wedding or memorial service, a little competition breaks out in the pews over debts and trespasses? We'll get to that next week.

The 20-second spiritual practice called the Lord's Prayer is important to us. The prayer Jesus taught is so deeply embedded in our consciousness and in our hearts that hearing it – just hearing it start – provokes a kinetic memory in the body; we want to fold our hands, close our eyes, and bow our heads. It's intrinsic to our faith. Will Willimon has said, "A Christian is...someone who has learned to pray the Lord's Prayer." (*Lord, Teach Us* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1996], p. 18)

I think that bar is a little low, and that *how someone lives* may, in fact, be a better indicator of Christian faith, but his point is that people who follow Jesus learn the prayer he teaches. And most of us learn it early in life. One of my favorite moments in worship happens when I hear a young voice saying the prayer loud enough to be heard over the rest of us.

Now we turn to today's line from the prayer: *Give us this day our daily bread.*

With this line Jesus signals a shift in the prayer away from the opening words about the holiness of God and God's reign to more specific, human needs. Several petitions follow in rapid succession, each with an imperative: *Give. Forgive. Lead. Deliver.* The urgent verbs of these petitions sound almost impertinent, so demanding of God as to be disrespectful. That Jesus would teach us to use such strong wording in our prayer indicates how much we can trust the one to whom we pray. God wants our authentic selves in prayer. A parent hears this kind of language from their child all the time – the demanding imperatives that parents deal with, God has to deal with from us in this prayer.

We have been watching the pronouns in the prayer. From the start Jesus teaches that we do not offer privatized prayer to “my” God. Nowhere in the prayer does the first-person pronoun appear. That's true even when we get to these petitions, each of which is intensely personal – *I worry about my bread, my debt, my forgiveness, my temptations* I'll worry about mine; you worry about yours. Those are all challenges in life you and I know about intimately, but Jesus does not want us to think of ourselves as facing them alone, in isolation from others. It's not *give me today my daily bread*. Life doesn't work like that. In the prayer, it's *our bread, our debts, our temptations*.

In the film *A Man Called Otto*, Tom Hanks plays Otto Anderson. Following the death of his wife and his

retirement Otto feels that his world has ended. He slips further and further into isolation. He closes in on himself and cuts himself off from others. Otto's neighbor Marisol tries to break through to him repeatedly, but cannot. Finally, she says to him, "You think your life is so hard and...you have to do it all on your own - well guess what? You can't. No one can."

The film follows the story of the neighbors surrounding Otto, helping him understand he is not alone and that no one can do life by themselves. Eventually they become a small community around Otto and bring him back to the land of the living. We cannot thrive in life apart from others.

Jesus communicates that truth when he teaches that we use collective pronouns when we pray, because life is not a private, isolated, atomized reality. We are created for community.

Give us this day our daily bread.

This phrase in the prayer stands out in the biblical Greek. Unlike the other petitions in the prayer that begin with a verb - *forgive, lead, deliver* - this line starts with a noun: *bread*. It reads literally something like this: *The bread of us daily, give us today*. Jesus focuses here more on the *bread*, than the giving of it. *Daily bread. Bread daily.*

As Jesus taught this line in the prayer his listeners, who knew the stories of the Hebrew people, would have heard an illusion to the “bread of heaven” that came down to the hungry Israelites as they escaped from enslavement in Egypt and wandered the wilderness. God provided manna daily, daily manna, and it sustained the people. It was only one day’s nourishment, and everyone received the same amount. No manna was wasted. No manna could be hoarded from one day to the next.

Jesus draws on that image as a way to teach us the difference between what is necessary for life and what is *beyond sufficient*. The parable of the rich farmer and his barns echoes the old story of the Israelites and the manna. When the land produces more than he could possibly consume, rather than share it with those in need, he decides to tear down his barns and build new, bigger ones to keep it all for himself. That way he can “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.”

Something like the American dream, isn’t it.

“You fool,” God says to the rich man in the parable,

“This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves, but are not rich toward God...Be on your

guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (Luke 12:15-21)

Give us this day our daily bread.

It would be hypocritical for the rich man in the parable with his hoarded surplus of grain to pray this line in the prayer Jesus taught. How could he pray only for his own needs to be met and ignore those of his neighbors? That may help explain the placement of the teaching of the prayer Jesus taught in Luke's gospel. The prayer precedes by only a few paragraphs the moment when Jesus tells the parable of the rich man and his extra barns, as if Jesus were saying, *remember the prayer I just taught? This is what I was trying to communicate: we all need bread each day, and if you have more than enough, then share it.*

The writing of early Christians on this line in the prayer shows that the Church understood exactly what Jesus was aiming at here. The *Didache*, a treatise on Christian faith written in the second century, and one of the earliest non-canonical sources of the prayer Jesus taught, says this:

"Do not be like those who are prompt to open their hand to receive and prompt to close it when it comes to giving...You shall not reject the needy but will share all things...and call nothing your own. If you share the eternal goods, shouldn't you share even

more those that are in passing?” (Quoted by Justo Gonzalez in *Teach Us to Pray* [Grand Rapids, Eerdmans; 2020], p. 110)

Praying this simple line about bread can be costly. In fact, that’s true of the entire prayer Jesus teaches. We should sit up and pay attention when we offer it each week in worship. Frederick Buechner warns us about the prayer.

“We do well not to pray it lightly. It takes guts to pray it at all. We can pray it in the unthinking and perfunctory way we usually do only by disregarding what we are saying...To speak those words is to let the tiger out of the cage, to unleash a power that makes atomic power look like a warm breeze.”
(Quoted in Will Willimon, *Lord, Teach Us* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1996], Epigraph)

Give us this day our daily bread.

To pray like that is to reject the culture of continuous consumption and instead learn to be satisfied with *only what we need*. This is a prayer *and* a commitment, a promise to help meet the most basic needs of others.

Pope Francis, elected pope ten years ago tomorrow, has written a short book of the prayer Jesus taught. “When we pray the Our Father,” he says, using the Catholic terminology,

“It would be good for us to linger a bit over this petition – ‘give us bread today’ – and to think about how many people do not have this bread. At home as children, when a piece of bread fell, my family taught us to pick it up right away and kiss it. Bread was never thrown away. Bread is a symbol of the unity of humanity; a symbol of God’s love for you.” (Pope Francis, *Our Father* [Milano, Rizzoli Libri; 2017], p. 74-75)

Last year in Minnesota the use of food shelves skyrocketed by 53.5%. Jesus is teaching us here to rein in our consumptive impulses and simply pray for *something to eat for others and for ourselves*. *To feed the hungry* is a universal ethical imperative for the Church, arising from this line in the prayer. I’m glad to report that just this morning Westminster’s Hunger Ministry Team released from our resources more than \$51,000 to several local food

shelves, to do our part to help meet the need.
 (<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2023/02/08/food-shelf-visits-jumped-nearly-54-percent-last-year-in-minnesota>)

Give us this day our daily bread.

Bread plays an outsize role in scripture. When we say this line, we are recalling the place of bread in the long story of the people of God –

from the provision of manna in the wilderness,
 to the breaking of bread as a sign of the first covenant,
 to the bread offered at Isaiah’s mountaintop feast,
 to the miracle of the loaves and fishes,
 to the words Jesus says as he breaks bread at the Last
 Supper,
 to the bread provided by Jesus at the resurrection
 picnic on
 the beach,
 to the eyes that open at the breaking of bread with the
 risen Jesus in Emmaus,

Even little Bethlehem, the town of Jesus’ birth, gets in on it: *Bethlehem* means *house of bread* in Hebrew.

With bread at the heart of the biblical story, it should not surprise us when Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.” (John 6:35)

Give us this day that bread, our daily bread.

This one short line in the prayer opens to us a world of meaning around the word *bread*. When we pray it, it takes us to the joyful feast of the people of God, where the breaking of bread is a sign of the new covenant, the promise of God.

Every time we eat our daily bread, whether at the communion table, at the banquet table, or at the kitchen table, we *take it*, and *break it*, and in that action, we remember the promise of God that *all shall be fed*.

To God be the glory.

Amen.