

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Colossians 2:6-19, Psalm 85, Luke 11:1-13
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The uninitiated think that prayer is about asking for what we want and receiving it, such as rain in a drought or healing for an illness, but we know from experience that it is rarely so simple or automatic. Prayer, far more than for the purpose of getting things, is about changing us and our world and increasing our trust in God.

In this morning's gospel lesson, the disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray..." He begins by teaching them a version of the prayer we have all come to know as the Lord's Prayer.

John Dominic Crossan, well known Roman Catholic New Testament scholar, has written, "The Lord's Prayer is Christianity's greatest prayer." And he continued, "It is also Christianity's strangest prayer."

This prayer, which all Christians hold in common regardless of denomination, is strange because it never mentions Jesus, Christ or Lord. In that sense it is a very Jewish prayer first prayed and taught by a very Jewish man.

Whereas "Father" is not the name used to address God in most Jewish prayers, God is referred to as the Father of the nation of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus will use the more personal address for God frequently to promote the idea that God is not far off but near and concerned for our welfare much like an earthly parent.

Even though this means of addressing God is more intimate and familiar, we are still instructed to use "Father" with great reverence. The entire prayer finds its meaning in whom we are addressing – the most Holy One of all. So we begin, "Father, hallowed be your name."

Using Father to address God makes our prayer personal and suggests that our God is like, but more than, a human parent. At the end of this lesson on prayer Jesus again refers to God as our heavenly Father who far surpasses the dedication of human parents toward their children. This should be so very comforting and reassuring for us.

I am a big fan of the TV show American Ninja Warriors. A similar one I now watch is Spartan Ultimate Team Challenge. Teams of five men and women face strength and agility obstacles over a lengthy outdoor course. The championship team crowned last week had a young man who, we were told, had a good upbringing but got off the track and became addicted to alcohol and drugs. His life so spiraled out of control that he eventually wound up in a homeless shelter.

At that point, he knew he had to make some changes and soon discovered Spartan competitions. These helped to turn his life around.

The game's officials also interviewed his father, who was in the audience to watch his son compete. The father said, "In spite of all the pain and sorrow I felt, I never gave up on my son." Similarly and more so, our heavenly Father will never give up on us or those we love, not in this life nor in the life to come.

Matthew's gospel version of the Lord's Prayer is the one we usually use and are more accustomed to, but when we pray later in this service, we will use the version in our prayer book more like the one we find here in Luke's telling. Be advised.

Luke's version is shorter and more pithy. There are fewer petitions. Praying, "Your kingdom come," reminds us that there is always more to come, and we are both to watch for signs of that kingdom that God is bringing and to behave as citizens of that kingdom. God's kingdom supersedes all lesser ones and our loyalty is to God's will first and foremost.

The author of the letter to the Colossians writes about our participation in the same kingdom re-envisioned by Jesus in this way. "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught abounding in thanksgiving."

The psalmist today has much to say about the nature of God's kingdom when he or she speaks of sins being forgiven, people rejoicing in the Lord, mercy and truth meeting together and righteousness and peace having kissed. In the fullness of time, the psalmist concludes, "Righteousness shall go before him and peace shall be a pathway for his feet."

Offering Hope, Healing and Hospitality, our mission statement, mentions kingdom ideals and kingdom goals.

I was again struck by something Dr. Wayne Dyer wrote in the book the Men's Breakfast Group is reading, I Can See Clearly Now. He wrote that when we have a choice between being right or being kind, we should always choose to be kind. That is kingdom behavior.

"Give us each day our daily bread." Daily bread is very practical and earthly. It may mean more than just sticky white, whole wheat or thick crust, however. Perhaps in this simple request we are asking God for everything we need to sustain health on this planet, including: fresh air, clean water, adequate shelter, companions, clothes and decent work to earn a living.

Someone has said that God's kingdom won't have fully arrived until every person has enough of these. To this end, our church and all people of faith have their mission – their work to do.

"...forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us." Of course, we want God to forgive us freely and often. The harder part is extending that same forgiveness to our fellow man and woman. My experience is that forgiveness is rarely automatic toward those whom I think have wronged me or my loved ones. It takes a lot of time and a lot of prayer. Wanting to forgive is where we start.

"...and lead us not into temptation." Finally, and very importantly, we pray not to find ourselves in a situation that might cause us to lose our faith or to deny our faith. Jesus himself prayed for a way around the agony of the cross in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the end, he met that excruciating challenge for our sake, but he doesn't want us to have to face such a trial. Let's hope and continue to pray we never do.

Prayer is not a magic formula for getting whatever we want. In fact, this passage on prayer today ends with Jesus saying that what we can be sure of getting when we persistently ask, knock, and search is God, the Holy Spirit. God, the Holy Spirit, is the best gift of all because it is like a GPS. If I were to write a modern version of the 23rd Psalm, I might start it, "The Lord is my Global Positioning System, I won't be lost for long." GPS shows us the best way to proceed, and if we get off course or make a wrong turn, it never stops redirecting us back to the right road and our final destination – eternal life. AMEN.