THE LIFE OF PRAYER IN A BROKEN WORLD (II)

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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This is the second of two sermons on the theme, "The Life of Prayer in a Broken World." I'm focusing on the Lord's Prayer as a model for our praying.

Last week I condidered the beginning and ending of the Lord's Prayer, and suggested that prayer is the art of discerning the connection between the Here and the Here. Prayer is the art of identifying the connectedness between the broken world in which we live and the God who is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

I also suggested that a key to this art of prayer is some discontinuous discipline, doing something odd, such as Quaker silence, Catholic liturgy, or Pentecostal speaking in tongues, embarking on some such habit that can help us to break with what I called the tyranny of the cognitive mind.

Today I want to focus on the middle petitions of the Lord's Prayer, as a way of showing how the life of prayer can fill up the whole world of our experience once we've found the inner connection.

I.

We must begin, naturally, where we are, living in a broken world. Too often, I'm sorry to say, the models that we have been given of prayer, begin somewhere else. Church art has tended to focus on the saint on the mountaintop, with light from heaven streaming down to his or her face. Too little have people attended to how the saint happened to get to the mountaintop, what he or she was doing down in the valley that permitted him or her to start climbing in the first place.

My mind drifts in this connection to a time when I was a junior in college. It was not a good time for me economically speaking, and I eventually had to move to a strange city in upstate New York in order to find work for the summer. In that place, otherwise unknown to me, where I had no friends, I quickly began to feel very much alone.

In the meantime I was carrying on a long distance relationship with a young woman who was working at the end of Cape Cod, whom I had known for some time: you know how frustrating that can be, when all you have to sustain you for long periods of time is the telephone.

To add to everything else, it seemed increasingly clear that that relationship, much as I treasured it, was coming to an end. So finally, one Friday afternoon I borrowed a car and drove half the night to meet her and presumably to end the relationship together. It was a lonely drive, a lonely time indeed, for me.

I take it that that kind of experience is not unknown to some of you, indeed that it bespeaks a kind of commentary on our soul in this place and this time, a lament of isolation and loneliness.

So Theodore Roethke has a poem, "The Far Field," which speaks, I think, for many of us in these times, yet particularly for me, as I recall that lonely drive out to the end of Cape Cod many years ago.

I dream of journeys repeatedly:
Of flying like a bat deep into a narrowing tunnel,
Of driving alone, without luggage
   out a long peninsula,
The road lined with snow-laden second growth,
A fine dry snow ticking the windshield,
Alternate snow and sleet, no oncoming traffic,
And no lights behind, in the blurred side-mirror,
The road changing from glazed tarface to a rubble of stone,
Ending at last in a hopeless sandrut,
Where the car stalls,
Churning in a snow drift
Until the headlights darken.

This is the context, I think, in which many of our prayers--due to the circumstances of our times and of our own histories-- must begin, if they are to begin at all: in the brokenness of isolation and loneliness.

Now I want to presuppose here, on the basis of last week's sermon, that we have a sense why and how it's possible to discover a connection between our inmost selves and the God who is near us. What I want to pursue here is the theme that the life of prayer empowers us to break out of the shell of our loneliness, like a butterfly out of a cacoon, and fly out into a world that's full of deep and gratifying relationships.

The life of prayer means, I believe, that we are given the power to leave that stalled car in the snow drift, and go forth into a springtime world of human companionship and natural vitality.

II.

Everything hinges now on the God who is near, whether this God is sherely some mystical presence, as of course we will want to say, or whether this God is not also a powerful, purposeful presence.

Biblical Faith opts for the latter. So it's characteristic that Jesus should teach his disciples to pray: "Thy Kingdom Come." Biblical faith envisions God as one who is working powerfully throughout the whole of human history, with one end in view: the establishment of a kingdom of justice and peace in a new and glorious creation.

So Jesus invites us to confess that kind of power and that kind of purpose, when we pray "Thy Kingdom Come." In this sense, Jesus was a visionary, and he invites us to be visionaries, too. He invites us to lift up our eyes to the overriding purpose that guides God's activity on our behalf: the establishment of a cosmic kingdom of justice and peace in a new creation.

I would even go as far as to say that Jesus invites us to entertain a certain kind of Divine madness: that is, if by sanity we mean aquiescing to the world as we experience it, surrounded by the threat of war and nuclear overkill, on the one hand, and living with the wrenching experience of loneliness inside, on the other.

Hear the resonance of Emily Dickinson, in this respect,cloistered in her own lonely world:

Much madness is divinest sense to a discerning eye;
Much sense the starkest madness.

As a visionary, Jesus calls us to a certain Divine madness, to see God's kingdom of peace and justice in a new creation as the outcome of this universe, not some wreckage at the end of a road, where the car stalls, churning in a snow drift until the headlights darken.

III.

Note well now, this is no bland optimism. Jesus invites us to enter into a cosmic vision of God's universal power and purpose, to be sure. But he also invites us to be prepared for a long way and a long struggle, the way of discipleship and self-sacrifice, as the context in which we keep alive our visionary hopes.

So he teaches his disciples to pray, "Thy will be done..." In a world in which the powers of evil are rampant, and in a world in which God has given us humans freedom to chose life or to chose death, the various realizations of God's kingdom can themselves only be fragmentary.

If God is the artist and we are the clay, and we abuse the freedom God has given us, then God has a rather refractory -- no, a downright resistant -- material to work with, in order to guide all things toward the final realization of God's kingdom.

Hence we are taught to pray, "Thy will be done." We live with the vision of what God's ultimate purposes are. Yet we also know that the way for God to realize those purposes in a world where human freedom is pervasively abused, must be a long and torturous way.

For this reason, the Christian tradition lives up the Cross as its central symbol: the new life of the resurrection comes only through the death on the Cross; the realization of the coming Kingdom happens, in this life, only through the way of suffering love, incarnated in the brokenness of our experience.

So we pray hopefully, "Thy kingdom come." But we also pray soberly, "Thy will be done...." The visionary utterance is incarnated in the anguish of brokenness, in this life.

IV.

Thus informed by the vision of the Kingdom and facing up to the reality of our brokenness, we are ready to move to the specific petitions that Jesus instructs us to bring before God for our own lives and for the world in general.

I am aware that here we are entering a very sensitive area. Remember, in this connection, the words of Huckleberry Finn: "Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fishline, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work."

Some years ago I was talking with a publisher about a certain volume I had in mind. He was saying to me, as publishers mostly do,that it wouldn't sell. As we were friendly enough, I inquired what kind of religious book I might write that could sell. He quickly responded, with apparent seriousness, "Why don't you write a book entitled, 'Prayers That Work.'"

Well, I do not intend to tell you here how to say any kind of prayer that works. I do not propose to instruct you how to pray for fishhooks and to get them. What I do propose is to tell you directly what Jesus instructs us to ask for. And then leave it at that, no more, no less.

He asks us, to begin with, to pray for our daily bread. Volumes have been written on this expression, which I don't propose to summarize here. Just this point: whatever else this means, it means that we are to ask for the bodily sustenance we need to get us through each day, with confidence that God will give it to us.

Notice that Jesus does not instruct us to pray for an income of $100,000 a year, or even any kind of financial security for tomorrow. Jesus, alas, did not have a piece of the rock. He instructs us to ask for just what we need to get us through the day

Then he teaches us to pray: "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Even though we use"trespasses" in this community when we pray the Lord's prayer, "debts" is probably the better translation, as recent New Testament scholarship has suggested.

It seems that Jesus thought of his ministry, in some sense, as a reinstitution -- on a vast, historical scale -- of the ancient Hebrew idea of the Jubilee year, when all the land would be allowed to lie fallow and all debts would be abolished. In short: when a new state of justice and peace, both within human history and within the world of nature, would be established.

Notice again that we are not instructed to build up our capital so we can have economic security for tomorrow. Rather we are instructed to pray for a radical redistribution of economic wealth and for peace with our relationship with nature and with all humans on God's goodearth.

V.

Now all this might sound like some very strange Divine economics, befitting a visionary like Jesus perhaps, but of little import for folks like you and me probably, living as we do in these lonely islands of affluence, surrounded by threats of war.

But all this very much relates to the texture of our daily lives, given an essential biblical premise about prayer: <u>we live as we pray</u>. So when we ask for our daily bread, for enough sustenance to get us through today, and no more; and when we ask for a world of justice and peace in our time, rather than our own fishhooks; then we commit our lives, we shape our lives, with these very petetions. We seek to practice what we pray.

Let me give you two examples of what I mean, one of them rather light, the other as deep as life and death.

A year or so ago, the press carried a report -- tucked away far from the first page -- of a certain professor of theology at a seminary in Waterloo, Ontario. It seems that in his spare time he had designed and built an all-electric car in his garage, as his "contribution to a better world."

He said the car would have a top speed of 55 miles per hour and a range of 80 miles on an overnight charge. The car is made of fiberglass, and costs

about three-tenths of one cent per mile to operate. His total investment has been about $3000 and he figures the car can be built commercially for that amount or less. It seems that he came up with a lovely, energy-saving, earth-loving idea.

I can readily imagine this obscure professor of theology praying each day: Give us this day our daily bread, and then seeking to live as he prays.

Another, more renowned story, comes from the Soviet Union, where not too long ago reports emerged that a certain Raoul Wallenberg is still alive in prison.

Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat in Hungary in the years of World War II. He used his position in those days with an incredibly brilliant imagination and courage, taking it upon himself to save the lives of thousands of Jews destined for extinction at the hands of Adolf Eichmann.

On one occasion, for example, Hungarian troops arrived at a complex of so-called "protected houses" that he had established, where Jews were staying, and began rounding up able-bodied men for forced labor. Wallenberg arrived and shouted at the officer in charge: "This is Swedish territory. You have no business here." The officer said he had orders to take the men. Wallenberg replied: "If you want to take them you will have to shoot me first." The troops left empty-handed.

Another time, Eichmann's men rounded up a number of Jews for deportation, including 11 who held Swedish passports. By the time Wallenberg heard of this they were on their way to Auschwitz in a sealed railway car. He chased the train in his car, finally catching up with it on the Hungarian-Austrian frontier. He was able to get the 11 Jews off the train, although the rest went on, presumably to their deaths.

When the Nazis, short of railroad cars, sent 30,000 Jews on the infamous 120-mile "death march" to the Austrian frontier in December 1944, Wallenberg followed the column. He took wagonloads of food, clothing and medicine, aiding the marchers, mainly women and children, as they fell by the roadside from hunger, exhaustion and exposure to the bitter weather. Along the way he also used bribery and threats, such as he could muster, to take back as many Jews as he could to the Swedish compound.

When the Russians arrived at the end of the war, they reportedly took him into custody, then back to Russia to prison, until this very day.

I can imagine Raoul Wallenberg, who was not a Jew, praying every day: "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." and then living each day as he prayed.

VI.

Do you see how prayer can take us out of our isolation? Do you see how once we have identified the inner connection between our own broken lives and the God who is with us that we can find the power to magnify, develop, and

revel in that connection, so that prayer fills the whole world of our experience?

We lift up our eyes to the Kingdom of God, that realm of peace and justice in a new creation that God promises for all things. And we commit ourselves to give our lives in the service of that kingdom, here in this broken world, notwithstanding the self-sacrifice that that service will require of us. We pray: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done..."

Then we concretely commit ourselves to require no more of this worlds goods than we need to live on each day, not security and capital, but our daily bread. And we likewise commit our lives, before God, to do all that we can, where we find ourselves, to establish the Jubilee year, to work for policies that befriend the earth and save human lives, rather than to aquiesce in policies that ravage the earth and threaten human lives.

We pray: "Give us this day our daily bread." And: "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." We seek to live as we pray.

To speak mudanely now, in terms of Wellesley College for a moment, with the examples of the Canadian theology professor and the Swedish diplomat still before us: I would imagine that people who pray the Lord's prayer in these parts would be among those who are working to put solar panels on our Science center, that they would be among those who want to be present at the racial-ethnic workshop this afternoon at two-o'clock in the Science center. And so on.

We live as we pray.

VII.

Then one final, personal point. What becomes of my loneliness? What becomes of my feelings of isolation?

I know a young man, I can tell you, who once was devastated by a broken relationship, who once thought he would never be able to return from a trip he made late at night to visit a dear friend for the last time.

I can also tell you that he has struggled to pray the Lord's Prayer truly, since then, to partake of this divine madness every day, and he has struggled to live as he prayed. And in and through this struggle, I can tell you, God has given him a whole new set of intimate relationships, a whole ne network of friends and co-workers that extends around the world, in marvellous ways.

Notwithstanding many ups and downs, then, many false starts and failures, and not a few times of depression, -- notwithstanding all this, as he surveys his life, and hereby testifies to you, he can only end by saying, as the Church so naturally concluded the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples: "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen."