

Sermon (7/24/16, Luke 11: 1-13):

Garrison Kieler, the creator of the 'Prairie Home Companion' radio show that airs on Public Radio, recently signed off for the last time. The most popular part of his show were the tales he told about a place he called Lake Wobegon. Over the years, Garrison endeared us to many of the characters he introduced us to from Lake Wobegon including Pastor Inkquist of the Lake Wobegon Lutheran church.

One such story about Pastor Inkquist was when he had just returned from a preaching conference, filled with a bunch of new ideas he was anxious to try. So on the Sunday following the conference, he announced to his congregation that he wanted to try a number of new things in worship and one of these things would be to call upon someone in the congregation next Sunday to offer the prayer during the service. Now, of course, the thought of being called upon to pray out loud struck quite the nervous chord in the folks of the Lutheran church.

During the entire week leading up to that Sunday, people worried about the prospect of being called upon. Many a parishioner nervously worked on a prayer they could use, just in case. Some scoured their Daily Word devotionals for little gems they could include, some kept a long list of every ache, pain, and ailment someone in the congregation was suffering from, and others spent hours in front of their computer writing out their prayers.

It was a tough week in Lake Wobegon. Many a table at the Chatterbox Café was filled with discussion about Pastor Inkquist's unfortunate decision to 'shake things up' a bit at the Lutheran church. Lutherans don't shake. They are much more self-controlled than that.

When Sunday finally arrived, most everyone at the church had some sort of prayer printed out, memorized, or well formulated in their mind. When the time came for the main prayer, most everyone just so happened to find something on the floor to intensely study. The biggest surprise ended up being that Pastor Inkquist didn't call on anyone...he just went right into the prayer himself as he always did.

Of course, after hearing this story, I couldn't help but to wonder what would happen if I had made a similar announcement one Sunday. My guess is that this would have been a very lonely place the following Sunday!

Why does prayer intimidate us so? Why do we tend to panic at the idea of being called upon to pray? Why would we rather face the prospect of dental work over leading prayer? Even when we are praying by ourselves, why are there so many times when our prayers feel deeply flawed, inadequate, and ineffective?

When I was a child, I remember being taught by a Sunday school teacher a model for prayer that followed an outline of Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. (The first letter of each section formed the acronym, ACTS.) I

tried that for a while but it wasn't very satisfying. I tended to grow impatient, wanting to skip over the first three parts to Supplication where I made my pleas to God for things I wanted and needed.

Many of us grew up nourished by the 'Lord's Prayer'. We are taught it at a young age and it tends to stick with us throughout our days. We pray it regularly during our Sunday worship, at church gatherings, and even when we are by ourselves. When I have visited parishioners suffering from the late stages of dementia, very often they can still recite the Lord's Prayer with me. It seems to be one of the last things the brain clings to, even as so many other memories fade away.

The version of the Lord's Prayer we pray today comes from the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Today's text is Luke's version. Our prayer is different from either of these gospel versions but that is probably a result of how the prayer evolved in the church.

In our reverential handling of this prayer, I think we sometimes neglect to see just how aggressive and straightforward this prayer tends to be.

The first words of the prayer put us on notice that we are about to encounter a new understanding of God. 'Our Father...' It is a term of intimacy, closeness, endearment, and love. It is a refutation of the idea that God is somewhere out there - aloof, distant, unapproachable, uninvolved, and, perhaps, best kept at arm's length. Jesus begins this prayer by suggesting that to hallow God's name is to dare to come close to God even as God desires to be close to us.

While in our present day sensitivities to the power and limits of words we appropriately wrestle with the shortcomings of an exclusively male term like 'Father', which tends to minimize the equally important maternal character of God, the intention is none the less clear. This is a God who desires to be close to us.

From there, the prayer moves quickly to four petitions and it is important to note that there is no 'please do this', or 'if it is your will God', or any hint of an apology for presuming too much or asking for more than we deserve, or even a long stream of praise. The language is plain and simple-sensitive to just how hard it is to be human.

'Your kingdom come'. It's a line we sometimes say in desperation as we deal honestly with a world that often feels like it is coming apart at the seams. The more we delve into the vision God has for his creation, the more we sense how far we are from it. 'Come, now, O God... overcome the mess we continue to make of things, dry the tears of your people. Your kingdom come!' It is an all too human prayer.

The second petition is 'Give us'. How much of our lives are consumed with the search for security and, yet, how many of us truly feels secure? Taken to its

extreme, we hoard more than our share, we grow stingy and greedy with the good gifts we have been blessed to receive, we do all we can to build walls and accumulate insurance policies to protect us from life's cruelties. Yet, no matter how hard we try, feeling secure seems forever elusive. This is not to say that such planning is unimportant. It's essential but it also reveals that when it becomes our obsession, it deadens the life we are intended to live.

'Give us *each day* our *daily* bread.' Nothing more, nothing less. Show us what enough looks like. Help us to receive and appreciate the enough you provide. Grant us the ability to find our security in the enough you promise.

Let's be honest, how much more satisfying would our lives be if we had a better handle on what 'enough' really looks like for ourselves and the communities we live in? 'Give us *each day* our *daily* bread.' This is a very human prayer targeting a very human longing – a longing whose depth we might not even be consciously aware of.

'Forgive us.' How incredibly hard it is to say these words - to come to terms with the fact that we mess up, we make mistakes, we wound, we do damage. How much more likely are we to deflect our shortcomings by blaming and listing the faults of the other; by reacting with harsh defensiveness and aggression? It is what tends to fill our political campaigns these days. The target is always the other and their shortcomings with little mention or even apology for the mistakes that are made by the self.

'Forgive us' are words we tend to avoid at all costs but, perhaps, that is only a symptom of how lacking we are when it comes to the second part of this petition, 'As we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.' Vengefulness seems to be the game plan we prefer. 'Eye for an eye' justice seems to be behind the gun fire that rules our streets taking life after life, destroying families and communities, inflicting harm upon those whose hearts are good and whose intentions are most admirable. Few are the words and deeds that seek to heal. Where does it stop? As Gandhi once said, 'Eye for an eye justice only leaves the whole world blind.' Perhaps seeking mercy begins with being merciful. Perhaps mercy begins with our demands to reform our incarceration system which imprisons about five times more people than most every other nation in the world. Perhaps pleas for forgiveness come much easier when there is a sense they will fall on merciful ears as God is merciful.

Lastly, the petition which asks God to 'Lead us'. How many times have we seen polls asking 'Do you think our country is heading in the right direction?' and how many times has the answer revealed a high concern that it is not? Even so, we keep searching for just the right person to lead us as we heap upon them the weight

of expectations too heavy for any mortal frame to carry.

Show us, teach us, shape us, form us, and lead us away from those destinations filled with trial and hardship. How essential it is to invest ourselves in the kind of learning the church is called to make a part of her mission so that God can do what we're asking for in and through this petition!

This petition seeks something much deeper than just a strong economy and a healthy foreign policy. It seeks the humility of recognizing that God's ways are often not our ways and it takes some doing to learn them and, even more so, great courage to live them.

Give us. Forgive us. Lead us. The prayer that Jesus has left us with is honest, aggressive, and thoroughly human. To pray it is to become more human. We don't have to apologize for this, we don't need to worry about how flawed our words might be, and we don't need to dress up our words in politeness because that is not what Jesus taught us. What we do need is a prayer that helps us to voice how hard it is to be human and how wonderful it is to know and even feel that in the frailty of our humanness, we are loved by a Father who promises to be with us always, even to the end of the age.

So who's ready to pray for us next week?

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.