

Sermon Series: *The Lord's Prayer for Today*

II. "Daily Bread"

Matthew 6: 5-13

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"Give us this day, our daily bread." Matthew 6:11

We stared at each other through the steam rising from our cups of coffee. The awkward silence had lasted about ninety seconds before my friend finally spoke up, "Chris, I guess the reason that I wanted to get together was to ask you a question. Or maybe just to describe my problem. Basically, I feel disconnected. I no longer feel close to God and I'm just not sure what to do about it. My Christian faith used to be such an important part of my life. But now, I've lost it. God feels so distant now, so remote, so removed from my life. I just need to know how do I connect to God?"

The longing, the deep longing to have this deep experience of connection with God is one of the defining characteristics of religious life in the 21st century. Almost everywhere you look there are books, pamphlets, billboards and church signs that guarantee a deeper and more lasting relationship with God. I took the opportunity this week, while I was at Barnes & Noble, to peruse the Christian Inspiration isle, and I was not surprised to find titles such as "How to Know God", "Conversations with Jesus", "Hearing God's Voice: Eight Keys to Connecting with God", and my personal favorite: "In Pursuit of God". Indeed there seems to be in our time, an unquenchable thirst for these feelings of connection. People have a deep desire for something more, something deeper and more profound than what they see all around them everyday. When I was in college, taking classes in the Department of Religion, I was stunned by how many people described themselves as "spiritual but not religious". How many of my classmates chose to take these Religion classes as part of an effort to find faith, find a faith in God that they had lost? Like my friend in the coffee shop, these college students were searching for some way to connect with God.

And I believe that this is the reason why we are all here this morning as well. There are hundreds of other ways you could spend a Sunday

morning rather than coming to this building at this time. You don't HAVE to be here! And yet you come, perhaps in hopes of connecting with God and each other. Karl Barth, who was the last century's most distinguished theologian once wrote that people come to church on Sunday with only one question in their minds: Is it true? The providence of God, the saving grace of Jesus Christ, the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection – is it true? I think Barth was probably right about that, but I would want to add a second part to his question, which would be: if it is true, how can I access it? How can I meet God in this place?

This is one of the reasons why we here at Morningside are in the midst of a sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. For the last 2000 years, Christians have understood that one of the primary ways we nurture our relationship with God is through the act of prayer, and at the center of the Church's theology of prayer has been THIS prayer, this particular prayer, prayed by Jesus and taught by Jesus to his disciples. Luke has his own version of the Lord's Prayer, and it is sparked when one of the disciples asks Jesus a simple question, "Lord, teach us to pray." That has been our question throughout this series, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Throughout the series we have been using Jesus' prayer as a model for our own faith lives in this complex time, and this week, we come to perhaps the most peculiar petition in the Lord's Prayer. "Give us this day, our daily bread." It really seems out of place. Up until this point we have been contemplating the magisterial dominion of God over all creation. We have addressed God as the One who is in heaven and whose name is hallowed or holy. We have spoken of heavenly kingdoms and the divine will for creation, but with this particular line of the Prayer, we are transformed. We are transferred from the heavenly realm to the kitchen table in an instant. A moment ago we were asking for God's kingdom to come down to earth. And now we are asking God to please pass the bread. Many of us are here this morning because of a deep spiritual hunger for an experience of the awesome grace of God and here I am preaching a sermon on food. Maybe you should have gone out to brunch after all!

Lillian Daniel is pastor of a Lutheran church in Connecticut. She tells a wonderful story of the night that the church trustees gathered for what she hoped would be a discussion of the importance of extending hospitality

in the form of a meal at the homeless shelter. Instead, what she got, was a 45-minute discussion of the recipe for Chili-Mac that odd blend of macaroni and cheese and cans of chili, that they were going to serve at the shelter that night. Daniel writes that during the meeting she found herself daydreaming about seminary and all of the important theological discoveries she had made there. All of the papers and projects on which she had labored for hours and days, only to arrive at this place in life. But her daydreaming was interrupted; the Clerk was barking, “Lillian, I need to make sure I have this right for the minutes! Did we say we were going to buy grated cheese or purchase a cheese grater?”

“I think I am losing my religion,” she had said to herself. Just when she was about to abandon faith in the goodness of God and the church, one of the trustees spoke up.

“Gosh, I’d sure hate to be homeless on a night like this.” For a moment, all was silent. The Clerk put down her pen; the calculator was pushed aside. These Christian men and women simply looked at each other across the table and in that silence, Daniel writes, “I felt as if I could hear God’s pen making a scratchy note in the book of our cherished lives.” The meeting went on, but there was that moment when we were all quiet and we could hear who had a cold and who was a runner and who was choked up. That moment when God broke through in the midst of a discussion on Chili-Mac. (1)

We could all tell stories of times when we caught a glimpse of God’s hand at work in the oddest of places. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Give us this day, our daily bread” he was reminding us of the truth that God breaks through in the ordinary, the mundane events of life. That God is present in the routine and the commonplace. Will Willimon writes, “When we want to meet God we Christians do not need to go up some high mountain or rummage around in our psyches. We do not even need to hold hands, close our eyes and sing ‘Kum Ba Yah’ in hope of revelation. We simply gather and break bread in Jesus’ name. This is where God has chosen to meet us, not in some heavenly kingdom in the sweet by and by but in the very places where we live and work and eat. Any notion that Christianity is some sort of other-worldly trip into Never-Never Land is dispelled by the time the Lord’s Prayer gets down to the nitty-gritty and asks God for bread.” (2) In the poetic words of the prologue of the Gospel of John, the truth of the Christian faith is that “the

word become flesh and lived among us.” Where do we meet God? Because of the incarnation we can boldly claim that God is among us now, in the most common places, in extraordinary ways.

One need only to think of the sacraments of the Christian church, communion and baptism, to gain an appreciation in the ways in which God works powerfully in the ordinary. At the font, common water is transformed into a living river of life and grace. Ordinary bread and wine are transformed into sustenance for the journey of our lives at the table of the Lord. Now, a participant in the communion service might say, “That bread on the communion table looks suspiciously like the bread I had for breakfast this morning. At breakfast, I did not think of it as holy.” “Right!” says the church. “That’s the point. Now, after praying this prayer over this bread at church on Sunday, perhaps you will eat your bread differently on Monday.” (3) Perhaps. Perhaps when we break bread this evening or dip our spoons into a steaming pot of Super Bowl Chili, we will remember that all we have is a gift from God; that all we have is sacred. Give us this day, our daily bread, we ask. We live in a culture that despises dependence. The worst thing we can be is dependent on another, and yet this small line stuck in the middle of the Lord’s Prayer debunks the myth of independence. Give us this day, our daily bread.

Two years ago, I received a phone call from a friend in North Carolina with bad news. One of the oldest members of my church in Warrenton had died earlier that day and her husband of over 60 years was a mess. My friend asked if it would be possible for me to come up and be with him during this difficult time and also prepare and deliver the eulogy. I asked when the service would be, and she chuckled and said, “Tomorrow.” Naturally I said yes. But when I began to plan the trip I remembered that my car was on its last leg and would never survive the 9-hour drive to the North Carolina-Virginia border. I panicked! “How will I ever be able to make it in time?” Well, not wanting to bother anyone else with my problems, sure of my own independence, I called a rental car company, but that too was not an option. Finally, despondent, I tried my last choice. I called a friend.

“Rob, a member of the church in Warrenton died this morning and I need to go up.” Before I could even finish my sentence, I heard my friend’s voice on the other end.

“Chris, your car will never make that trip! My keys will be sitting outside my door. Be safe.”

When we pray...give us this day, our daily bread, we are faced with the fact that none of us, not one of us, can get through this life on our own. We rely on God and we rely on one another. Though the need for a little bread each day may be a far removed from our experience, when we pray these words we are reminded of our needs and our call to meet the needs of others. OUR bread. Because in the end that is the intention of this petition of the Lord's Prayer and the goal of all prayer, that we will be transformed into people of faith and action through the practice of prayer. If you want to be a person of prayer, it is simple. Begin praying. Ask God to teach you to pray and then take note of how your life is transformed by the very mundane ordinary act of taking time to be present with God. Karl Barth said “to clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of this world.” When we pray we are transformed so that through God's work in us, our world might be transformed. All of this starts in ordinary places. And ordinary stable becomes crib to the Savior. And ordinary bush is set aflame by the presence of God. An ordinary river provides the setting for the descending of the Holy Spirit at the baptism of Jesus. An ordinary table is transformed into a place of meeting for the human and the divine. An ordinary people, like you and me, become new creatures through our encounter with God. Once we open our mouths and pray these words, nothing can be the same.

Give US this day OUR daily bread, Jesus taught us to pray. And so he reminded us not to think of bread only for ourselves. This table is large enough. This feast abundant enough for all God's creatures to share a place, if only we make room.

Several months ago, I watched the movie “Hotel Rwanda” for the first time. Its story has gripped me ever since. The movie takes place during the genocide that occurred in that country during the mid-1990's and is based on the true story of the manager of a 4-star hotel who saved hundreds of refugees from slaughter. At one point in the film the manager of the hotel walks into a room where a photojournalist is viewing horrifying footage of the genocide. The journalist apologizes for

the incident, but the manager is optimistic about the footage. “Surely,” he says, “the world must intervene now.”

But the journalist snaps back, “You don’t get it, do you? People are going to watch this on television and say ‘Oh my God, that’s horrible’ and then they’ll go back to eating their dinner.”

Sisters and brothers, we have much work to do in the world for the sake of Jesus Christ. Ours is a call to act in the name of Christ, whether it be through the work of the Shearith Israel Women’s Shelter, Common Ground, Intown Community Assistance, Clifton Sanctuary Ministries, the Six-Star Refugee Fellowship, or countless other ministries supported by our congregation. Ours is a call to act in the community. But this work begins with bowed heads, praying for us and for the rest of the world, “Give us this day, our daily bread.”

So when you clasp hands, bow knees, close eyes, or simply pause long enough to pray, this week, remember the power behind what you are doing. You are standing firm in the belief that God is still speaking, still acting, still reaching out to human kind. Pray boldly, confident that you will be transformed. And when you are finished, open your eyes and take a look at the world through the lens of Jesus Christ, through new eyes. Eyes that see, in the most ordinary of places, the extraordinary grace of God reaching out to meet you. Amen.

- (1) Story printed in *What is Good Ministry: Resources to Launch a Discussion* (Duke Divinity School and Pulpit and Pew), p. 4-8.
- (2) Will Willimon, *Lord Teach Us: The Lord’s Prayer and the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).
- (3) Ibid.