

Can We Talk?

A Meditation on Luke 11:1-4, 9-10

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United Church of Christ
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*[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and...his disciples
said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." – Luke 11:1*

I support the Hands of Peace program. I believe in its purpose of promoting understanding across cultures and developing youth leaders to become change agents for peace. Why? My only trip to the Holy Land was during the First Intifada.

The twelve-hour flight was scheduled to depart New York City for Tel Aviv at 9:00 PM. At midnight the passengers were still sitting at the gate – tired, frustrated, losing patience. No reason was given for the delay. Boarding did not begin until 1:00 AM.

I plopped down in my economy class aisle seat and buckled in. A Palestinian, wearing a black-on-white checkered *keffiyeh* like Arafat's, placed his carry-on in the bin above me, closed the door, and sat down one row back and across the aisle. Several passengers later, an Israeli wearing a *yarmulke*, ticketed for a seat one row up and in front of me, opened that same bin overhead, removed the Palestinian's luggage, put it on the floor, and replaced it with his own.

Seeing his belongings now on the aisle floor, the Palestinian took exception, rose from his seat, and asked the Israeli what he thought he was doing. The Israeli responded by punching the Palestinian in his midsection, who countered with a right uppercut. The fight turned into a wrestling match, with both combatants landing squarely in my lap, continuing to struggle!

A muscular flight attendant and a burley sky marshal charged in, separated the two, and escorted them to vacant seats on opposite sides and opposite ends of the compartment, as far away from each other and with as many people between them as possible.

I thought to myself, "This should be an interesting flight," muttering a prayer under my breath: "Lord, help us!"

It takes a while to calm down after such an incident, so it was after 3:00 AM before I finally dozed off, only to reawaken at dawn, the cabin lights still off, the first rays of sunlight squeezing through slight slits at the bottom of the plane's not-quite-completely-closed window shades.

I noticed some passengers standing...only they were not stretching their legs or walking to the lavatory. They were facing eastward, at a peculiar angle to the rows of seats. Still drowsy, it took a moment before it dawned on me that they were praying. All of them were praying.

The children of Abraham of the Jewish faith were wearing blue-on-white *tallits* (prayer shawls), and *tefillin* (boxes containing verses from the *Torah*) tied to their foreheads by long leather straps, the *Hasidim* slowly rocking on their heels, facing toward Jerusalem, reciting the *Birkhot Hashahar* -- the early morning blessings:

Blessed are Thou, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe,
Who gives our hearts understanding to distinguish day from night.

Blessed are Thou, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe
Who has created me as a free human being.

Blessed are Thou, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe,
Who opens the eyes of the blind....

Standing in the rows as well were the children of Abraham of the Islamic faith. Those nearest the exits and on the aisles had unfurled their prayer rugs. As best they were able, they all were facing toward Mecca for the *Fajr*: the first of five daily prayers:

Allah is great.
Glory be to Allah, praise be to Allah,
there is no god except Allah, Allah is most great,
and there is no power and no strength except with Allah...

When those on the prayer rugs reverently prostrated themselves, the Muslims in the rows of seats also would bow down as far as physically possible.

And what were the children of Abraham of the Christian faith doing, at this holy moment when the cabin had turned into sacred space, and the devout of two of the world's great faith traditions were praying, in Hebrew and in Arabic, to the same God?

Sleeping. Snoring away. I saw no Christian rise to their feet at that early morning hour to join in praising and thanking God for the precious gift of another day of life.

The fact is that praying – especially in a public setting like an airplane or a restaurant – makes many Protestant Christians uncomfortable. We turn to the clergy to pray in public, even in as safe a setting as a church gathering. Why? Because being asked to pray aloud makes many of us nervous. Because we worry we will not find the right words. Because we wonder if we are worthy. Because we fear others might not find our prayers good enough.

True, Jesus did say we should go into our closets to pray, to avoid succumbing to the sinful pride of religious hypocrites who practice their piety in public, not in the service of God, but to call attention to themselves. But that is not our problem. Our problem is that the contemporary church – unlike the synagogue and the mosque – has failed to teach the laity how to pray.

Glenview Community Church is fortunate to have on staff the Rev. Bobbie McKay, our Pastoral Associate for Spiritual Life, who has taught hundreds (thousands?) the spiritual discipline of talking with God. But her ministry is unique. Studies confirm, at least within western Christianity, that the majority of people in the pews feel unsatisfied with their prayer life.

Interesting, is it not, that while Jesus taught his followers about many subjects, in the Christian scriptures, his followers only ask him to teach them one thing: “Lord, teach us to pray.”

Fascinating also is Jesus’ response. He does not identify one style of prayer as better than another...nor does he offer a special technique for praying more effective than any alternative methodology...nor does he let the disciples in on the surefire secret for getting out of God whatever they want... No, he gives them one prayer as an example, so short that it can be written on a 3x5 card. When you pray, he said to them, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.

Short. Simple. Succinct. But not the version of the Lord’s Prayer we all grew up hearing. The version in Luke sounds abbreviated, truncated, unfinished. It may be similar, but it certainly is different from the version of the Lord’s Prayer that we recite every Sunday morning.

That is because the version more familiar to us that we print in the bulletin comes from Matthew...plus an extra doxology and an “Amen” added to make it sound more finished. The missing “Our” before “Father”; the specification that this “Father” is the one “who art in heaven”; the parallel wording clarifying that “Thy kingdom come” means “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”; and the words “but deliver us from evil” (literally, “from the Evil One”) – all were added by Matthew to help explain his understanding of the prayer’s meaning.

As for the ending line --“For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever” – that is not found in either Matthew or Luke. It comes from the prayer of King David found in First Chronicles 29, was added to the Lord’s Prayer in the late first or early second century, and was included in the *Didache* – a catechism-like book summarizing the apostles’ teachings.

Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer is far more likely closest to how Jesus responded when his disciples asked to be taught how to pray.

Jesus starts by teaching that prayer begins with the recognition that even as we are all children of Father Abraham, so too we are all children of God the Father: the God who gave us life, the God whose loving kindness -- *hesed* -- steadfastly holds each of us in compassionate care, the God whose values we are to reflect and toward whom we are to show reverence and respect.

“Your kingdom come.” If only we realized just how political that petition really is! God’s realm is marked by justice and righteousness, by universal peace and prosperity. It is the world of *shalom*, where everyone sits under their own vine and fig tree, and no one makes anyone else afraid. To pray for God’s kingdom to come is also to commit to working to make it reality.

Then the prayer turns to three essential human needs: bread, forgiveness, and preservation. These petitions call upon us (1) to look to God for sustenance, satisfied with enough, rather than coveting for more; (2) to seek God’s mercy and grace, recognizing our own need to extend compassion and reconciliation to others; and (3) to ask God to keep us from “the time of trial,” which has less to do with resisting various temptations, and more to do with “protection from circumstances that test or imperil faith, especially through the threat of persecution.”¹

The Jerusalem Post once quoted Christian theologian, John Dominic Crossan writing that the Lord’s Prayer “is utterly, totally, fully Jewish -- there’s nothing in it that is particularly Christian,” and that “The Lord’s Prayer comes from the heart of Judaism to the lips of Christianity.”²

The Berkley Institute for Islamic Studies notes that, while the Lord’s Prayer is absent from Muslim rituals, there is a belief within some Islamic groups that the archangel Gabriel revealed a version of the Lord’s Prayer to the Prophet Muhammad as a healing for his physical pain, which the prophet, in turn, passed on to those who are suffering. While the reaction of Muslim scholars is mixed regarding that tradition, the institute concludes: “the Islamic version of the Lord’s Prayer is too close to be a mere coincidence...”³

Considering this, I want our Hands of Peace guests to know that, to the degree you are comfortable and find its petitions consistent with your own Jewish and Muslim faith traditions, you are welcomed to join us in the Lord’s Prayer at the appropriate time in this service.

And I invite us Christians to learn from the other Abrahamic faiths the discipline of praying without ceasing. Jesus taught his disciples that we are to ask and keep on asking; seek, and keep on seeking; knock and keep on knocking...promising that if we do, God will answer our prayers by giving us the spirit – the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and awe and piety...the spirit that produces the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...the spirit of God which keeps people from trivial arguments over “trespasses” or “debts,” and stops people from coming to blows over whose luggage belongs in which overhead bin.

¹ Matthew Skinner, Assoc. Prof. of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul. *FONW*, Year C, Vol 3, Page 289.

² <https://www.jpost.com/International/Lords-Prayer-totally-Jewish-says-US-theological-expert>. November 15, 2010.

³ <https://bliis.org/essay/lords-prayer-islam/>. January 13, 2018.