July 28, 2013 – 10th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12)

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True confession time. Until I got to seminary, I'm pretty sure I wasn't aware that the Lord's Prayer was in the Bible. I know for a fact that I had no idea that there were two versions – the one we heard today and the one found in the Gospel of Matthew – or that they were different. You might have noticed that there are a few things that were either left out of Luke's version or added into Matthew's version, depending on who you think wrote first. Personally, considering Matthew's penchant for embellishing the text, I suspect that Luke's version is the earliest.

You might also have noticed that the doxology – "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever," was also left out. It doesn't appear in either of the biblical versions, but instead shows up in a document called the Didache, which is one of the earliest known Christian teaching documents and was written in the late first or early second century. It's pretty amazing that a prayer that we recite in every one of our liturgical settings has been in continuous use since the very beginning of the Church. It's a tradition that connects us to the first followers of Jesus, and through the centuries to everyone in between.

It's fitting, then, to talk about this passage, and the Lord's Prayer, in terms of relationship. The very first word of the prayer, Father, establishes a specific relationship with God. Father, Abba, Dad, Pops. Whatever you want to call him, there is no other relationship like it. Jesus is not just talking about HIS father – remember, he's teaching his disciples this prayer. He means to tell them, and us that God, his father, is also OUR father. Matthew makes it even clearer by actually adding the "our" in his version. The relationship is family.

The next two lines establish that this person who is our father is also God and King, and deserves our praise and adoration. Luke ends with "your kingdom come" rather than add "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," as Matthew does. The last part is really redundant, since I'm assuming that one of the hallmarks of God's kingdom would be his will being done. But Matthew liked to be sure we got the point.

Luke then moves on to the meat of the prayer. Three imperative verbs – give, forgive, and don't bring – right in a row. Bing, bang, boom! Pretty demanding! But that's the nature of this prayer. It gets right to the point – no flowery language, no beating about the bush. Let's take them one at a time.

"Give us each day our daily bread." The word for daily here is *epiousion*. It's an interesting word, which only appears twice in the New Testament – here and in Matthew's version. It means more than just a daily delivery from the bread truck. It means everything that is necessary and sufficient for the coming day. It carries the sense of God providing for us today and tomorrow, so we don't have to worry about it. There's a feeling of trust and safety about this word that you would expect from a father.

"And forgive us our sins…" Once again, this verb is in the imperative. This isn't "please forgive our sins," or "I wish you would forgive our sins." This is a demand. But with that demand comes our part of the deal, "for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." Luke's version is different from the one we're used to from Matthew. Luke says "forgive our sins FOR we forgive the debts of others." Matthew says "forgive our debts AS we forgive the debts of others."

Or to put it another way, Luke says "forgive our sins BECAUSE we are forgiving (in the present tense) others," while Matthew says "forgive our debts (and he uses a different word from Luke here) IN THE SAME WAY or TO THE SAME DEGREE as we forgave (in the past tense) the debts of others."

Time out for a little Greek lesson. Tenses in Greek convey more than just when the action takes place, like past, present, or future. They also convey HOW the action takes place. The present tense carries with it a sense of continuing action; so in Luke's version "forgiving" means ongoing forgiveness, not a one shot.

There are two past tenses in Greek, the imperfect and the aorist. Don't worry, there won't be a test. The one Matthew uses in his Lord's Prayer is the aorist tense. The aorist conveys the sense of an action that has been completed in the past; so when Matthew uses it he's saying that God should forgive us to the extent that our own forgiveness of others is complete.

Either way you look at it, through Luke's words or Matthew's, our forgiveness from God is, in our own words as we say the prayer, contingent in some way upon our own forgiveness of others. Though we are using commanding language to God, we are also putting our own skin in the game.

And then there's the final demand, "Do not bring us to the time of trial." Or "temptation" as it's also translated as, and as we say it every Sunday. This is the trickiest of the three demands, I think, because why would God even THINK of leading us into temptation or a time of trial, presumably of our faith? That doesn't seem very God-like or father-like to me. Matthew adds, "but deliver us from evil," which takes the sting out of it, but Luke ends the prayer without that last line.

Well, one way of thinking of it might be to look at the Lord's Prayer not only as a series of petitions or demands, but also as a series of descriptions. Specifically, descriptions of what God's kingdom might look like.

God's kingdom would be a place where all of our needs would be fulfilled before we even knew we needed them. It would be a kingdom of peace because no one would feel the need to take from others or hoard. It would be a kingdom of creativity and contentment because no one would be struggling merely to survive.

God's kingdom would be a place where forgiveness, not hatred, was the predominant passion. It would be a place where reconciliation, not division, was the national pastime. It would be a place where acceptance, not bigotry, consumed the hearts and minds of all the people.

And God's kingdom would be a place of joy. Joy because our trials would be over. Joy because we would be staying eternally in the loving arms of our family – Jesus our brother and God our father.

So like so many things that come to us from God, this, our most familiar and beloved prayer, exists in two times – the now and the not yet. At the same time we pray for our needs, and for our forgiveness, and for our safety, we are praying for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus makes it clear in the parable that follows that God wants us to ask him for what we want and need – even to the point of being obnoxiously persistent. He also makes it clear that God, as a loving parent, wants to give us all that we ask him for. "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."

But God isn't a cosmic vending machine where we put in a prayer and get a candy bar or a pony. Sometimes prayers seem to go unanswered and things don't work out as we hoped they would. Sometimes, even, disaster strikes and it seems like God has forsaken us altogether.

I can't even begin to understand why this is so, and all the platitudes in the world about things happening for a reason or being all part of God's plan don't always help. I can only counsel us all to trust God and maybe once in a while let go of our wants and needs and just pray Jesus' prayer thinking only about the kingdom of God to come.

At the very least, it may distract us from our present troubles, and remind us, even if only briefly, that God truly does love us as a father loves his little children. And sometimes, that's enough.

Amen.