
A Careless God and Terrible Friends

Luke 11:1-13 and Genesis 18:20-33

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 24, 2016 by the Rev. Dr. Jason Byassee

I'm honoured to preach in Duke Chapel again. I grew up a Duke fan in Chapel Hill, where such allegiance won me few friends. I went to seminary here and did doctoral work here and taught here so I've done 3-4 tours of duty on this campus. I love where I teach now at Vancouver School of Theology and realize from the other coast of this continent just how unique Duke Chapel is: who would have thought hey, let's build a hybrid of Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago and Canterbury Cathedral right here in this pine forest in central North Carolina in the 1920s? That's an ambition big enough for James B. Duke, but only God could have thought to have an African-American architect, Julian Abele, design a campus in quiet subversion of Jim Crow segregation laws. I love Terry Sanford's description of Duke as a place of "outrageous ambition." And what's more outrageous and ambitious than to have vibrant Christian worship at the heart of a world renowned university? I wonder what other blessings from God we take for granted, that if we stop and notice would stagger us beyond repair?

Like this prayer from Jesus that most of us say every day, without stopping and contemplating. We live in strange days in this country. Folks want to do something to counter the crazy. The *something* we can do is pray. And the stories from the bible this morning tell us how. Now, if you're already an expert on prayer you can go ahead and leave, get yourself a coffee, pray for the rest of us. But most folks agree that prayer is really hard. If you're new to faith prayer feels kinda stupid. Like you're talking to yourself, as crazy as your non-religious friends fear. If you're experienced in faith, *prayer is even harder*. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, maybe the 20th century's most widely recognized saint, found prayer painfully difficult for decades. Isn't this interesting--the holier you are, the more God seems to withdraw the comfort of divine presence. God doesn't have to rush to your side to reassure you like an anxious boyfriend. *No one feels accomplished* at prayer. Frederick Buechner says prayer is not for the wise. It's for children, and the childlike. Those who can trust, and wonder, and accept a gift. The rest of us will struggle. So, God has given us some help this morning with these texts.

The first is from Genesis and it's about Sodom and Gomorrah. Now these two cities are associated with certain sorts of sexual sins. This is wrong. The prophet Ezekiel makes clear Sodom and Gomorrah were condemned . . . for their lack of hospitality—for mistreating guests and the poor. Ezekiel 16:49 "This is the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." Some visions of "greatness" today disregard or punish the poor, the immigrant, the stranger. God is furious. And Abraham has to talk God down. Abraham bargains with God like they're in a sale in a Middle Eastern Bazaar, like an expert at the Saturday yard sales. And it leaves me wondering--what if we prayed like this?

Some think of God as removed, disinterested, like a judge in a case where he doesn't know our name and doesn't care. But Genesis shows God is hot-blooded, passionate, and quaking with anger. Let me at em! I'm gonna kill em! And Abraham says no no no—you can't kill em God. What will people say? Abraham knows God, and plays to divine vanity, God's sense of shame. I mean, if there are 50 people who are good you can't wipe em *all* out, can you? *No, I guess you're right, if you can find me 50 righteous people I won't kill em all*. Ok, God, if you'll spare em for 50, how about for 45? Abraham is good at this, and God goes along, all the way down to 10 people, which they can't find, and so the city is destroyed. Bummer. The point is this—Abraham prays *boldly* and *cleverly*. And God relents. Remember this sort of story when anyone tells you the God of the bible is cruel or mean. Here God is passionate, but also reasonable, and can be argued with, and is mercy all the way down. I've tried to pray like this (it's weird): God, don't you let cancer

take that one, you know what people will say. God don't let people like *that* run your world, they'll wreck it. I don't know if praying like this works. I just know the bible tells stories like this. Eventually God finds one righteous person on earth. And saves the whole world for the sake of that one. Jesus. Abraham wasn't quite bold enough in his bargaining. God would have gone down from fifty all the way to one. And that one is God's own self.

Our second story is from Luke, where Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer. Usually if you ask Jesus a question, he deflects, plays defense, jujitsus the conversation into something else.ⁱ Not here. The disciples ask the perfect thing for the first time, Lord, how do we pray? And Jesus *responds*. He launches right in. *Ok, thought you'd never ask, here's how to pray*. I was in Israel last year, and I got a postcard with the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic. At the airport the security people grabbed it, showed it around, asked me some hostile questions about it. It looked like Arabic to them, so they were nervous. I said it's just a postcard, cost me 50 cents. But what if I'd agreed that it was a security threat? You're right. There's a revolution in that prayer. You should lock anyone up who takes it seriously.

We human beings *are* what we do regularly. The church repeats this prayer of Jesus to let it steep in our bones, to work on who we are when we're *not* thinking about it. I heard a poet defend memorizing poetry.ⁱⁱ The reason we do it is for a day when we lack words and we really need them. Then, the poem we memorized years ago sneaks up . . . and gives us a kiss. That's why we memorize the Lord's Prayer. For that moment of crisis when we *don't* know what to say. Steve Sager, a rabbi here in Durham, tells of listening to other tourists at the Grand Canyon. They said things like "holy cow!" Interestingly religious language, but from some other religion. Or they cursed—words involving excrement or sex or God. This is what people say who have no prayers. What did Sager say? The Jewish blessing in the presence of a natural wonder. "Blessed art thou O Lord God, king of the universe, for thou hast done great things on earth and in heaven."

But then the Lord's Prayer isn't exactly like what was read from Luke. Let's pray together the version in Luke. It'll feel a little weird. Repeat after me:

*"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."*

And that's it. No Our. No who art in heaven. No Thy Will be done. No deliver us from evil. No thine is the kingdom etc. This is the Cliff's Notes version of an already-short prayer. And depending on your bible translation it may read really differently. Texts like this often flummoxed poor scribes. Because they knew, hey, I'm a monk, I pray that prayer every hour. It doesn't go like that! So they'd change the manuscript to match their prayers. But this is probably closer to what Luke first wrote down. Our more familiar version comes from other gospels. Let it stay weird just for this sermon and then we can go back to saying it like King Jimmy in 1611.

First, *Father*, Jesus teaches us to address God as "Father," abba, daddy. Some of us immediately recoil. What if we had a bad relationship to our father? What about mothers, shouldn't they get a little love? So some change the gender to neutral. "Our parent." Sounds sort of distant right? I've heard folks address God as "Mother-Father," which sounds like a cussword. Here's the thing—in Jesus' day, the Greco-Roman world, fathers had unimaginable power. They could love their children and I'm sure most did. Or they could kill their children. Sell them into slavery. Beat them. So it's not that father was an altogether positive word then. In the Old Testament, God is referred to as father a few times, just as God is referred to as mother a few times. Jesus refers to God as Father hundreds of times. It didn't start

with Jesus, but he makes it his own. So when we call God Father we're not imagining our daddy in the sky, only bigger. We're speaking to God the way Jesus does. The way Jesus *is*. I hope this can be healing for those whose fathers who have mistreated them. There *is* a Father who does not and never will. Friend of mine was in Israel this year, sitting by a playground, and heard a little girl run up to her dad squeeling abba abba abba! He'll never pray that word, Father, the same way again.

Whatever it means to call God Father, it can't mean God is male. God doesn't have sexual parts like we do or God would be a creature. The Son of God isn't sexually generated or younger than the Father, unlike every human child. Every analogy limps. We call God Father because we're growing into the intimacy Jesus has with the one who sent him. There are no safe words for God. Every word can be misused. The trick is to use well the words we've been given.

Hallowed be your name. I remember learning this prayer and thinking it had something to do with Halloween. Both words come from the same root—holy. Hallow means to make something holy. To pray hallowed be thy name is to bless the Lord's name. Names have power. That's why Donald Trump invents humiliating nicknames. Or we give someone a nickname of affection. The actual name of God is known only to God. We call it Yahweh, but that's a scholarly guess, the Jews left the vowels out for a reason. If we got the name right, presumably we'd all explode, like the bad guys in *Indiana Jones*. When God's people behave as God wants, God's name is blessed, hallowed. And when we don't, God's name is profaned. Stomped on. Here's the amazing thing. God leaves the divine name in our hands. You'd think God would have better sense, wouldn't you, than to be that careless? Than to let God's reputation be honoured or trashed based on us?

Your kingdom come. This is the kingdom Jesus preached, in which the poor are blessed and sins are forgiven and everyone has enough, not too much, not too little. There's an old joke, that Jesus preached the kingdom but all that came was the church (forgive us church nerds for what we think is funny). Here's what the kingdom is about. God's blessings aren't just *for* us. They're through us for other people. And God's kingdom isn't about heaven far off in another life someday. It's about God's beautiful world, that we've wrecked, that God will not let go of. Not ever. Here's the problem with faith. Maybe it's just a problem with being human. When God chooses us, loves us, marries us, we think it's *for* us. But God's blessings aren't meant to stop with us. They go *through* us for everybody else. Again, I'd have thought God would have a more efficient way of saving the world than through the church. I mean, I've been a pastor, I've led committee meetings, we can't even agree on who gets a key to the building. But God keeps trusting *us* to be God's people, God's conduit, to shower blessings on God's world. Sort of careless of God, don't you think?

Give us each day our daily bread. Not our daily caviar. No protein shake with kale and locally sourced seasonal fruits. Just bread. In occupied France in World War II, when everyone feared hunger, parents realized if they let their kids go to bed with bread instead of a teddy bear, they'd sleep better. It was a sign that there'd be bread *for tomorrow*. And that's what this prayer more literally says. Give us today *tomorrow's* bread. Just one day more (there's a song from *Les Mis* about this . . .). When Jesus sends out missionaries he commands them to bring no provisions. They're to rely on others' hospitality. And Jesus tucks a missionary prayer for provision into his most famous prayer—give us one day's food. To pray the Lord's Prayer is to be a missionary—vulnerable to the hospitality of those who receive you. This is also a prayer for manna. When the Israelites are in the wilderness, God provides food from heaven for one day. No more—gather too much and it'll rot. No less—those who gathered too little found they had enough anyway. And I wonder if this isn't how God provides for us? Not too much—if we have too much it'll rot our souls. Not too little—God means no one to have too little.

An artist friend of mine in Vancouver says his art took off when he realized he wouldn't starve. There's only romance in the starving artist cliché until it's time to eat. There is nothing romantic about hunger. He realized he'd never be rich, would never own property, would never satisfy his middle class family, but he wouldn't die homeless and poor either. And suddenly having confidence he'd eat, his art started to soar. And he asked, what would you do if you

weren't afraid economically? The market wants us terrified, working non-stop, charging more than we can afford on credit cards, never paying off balances. God's economy says stop. There's enough. You can rest. On the eve of the Sabbath God would give the Israelites enough manna for *two* days and it wouldn't rot. God believes in rest. The marketplace does not (And people accuse *God* of being a cruel master). Give us this day our daily bread, a simple hearty prayer for simple hearty food for all. Notice the *us*. This isn't a prayer for a microwaved meal scarfed alone, no drive-through meal thoughtlessly consumed. It's for a common meal with friends and strangers and anyone who's hungry. With Christ as host, and guest, and food.

Forgiveness. A whole sermon, or lifetime of sermons, on this one. Jesus binds up, intertwines, our forgiveness from God with our forgiveness of others. St. Augustine says this, "Nothing so surely trounces the enemy than our mercy toward others" (repeat). Scripture says two things about forgiveness. One, we all desperately need it. And when we think we don't, that's when we need it worse. And two, the only way to get it, is to give it. Forgiveness seems to be the sort of gift you can't receive without immediately passing it on. And if there is anything our gospel has to say in this world of meanness it's this: God is altogether mercy. The only God there is, is nothing but mercy.

And do not bring us to the time of trial. Note—there will be trials. Following Jesus is not easy. Our Lord dies on a cross, tortured to death. Lots of people go to God with requests for stuff or comfort or ease or happiness. I like the joke about the guy looking for a parking place praying, God, if you show me a space I'll go to church, I'll tithe, I'll stop cheating on my taxes, oh wait God, nevermind, here's a spot. Just *try* following Jesus in a world where people think crushing the weak is Christianity. No wonder Jesus promises hardship. This prayer asks for a little relief from that hardship. Just don't make it worse, God. Help us. It's the prayer of everyone who's ever suffered. And God hears every prayer. Offers mercy we can't see. God *is* eternal mercy. God is the eternal answer to prayer. Every real prayer is for more of God. And every real answer to prayer is more of God.

Now Jesus goes on and tells a few stories about prayer. "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?" It's supposed to be funny. Biblical humor is an acquired taste. No terrible father gives a kid a scorpion at snack time. Ok, Jesus says, if even a *terrible* father wouldn't do that, what about a good God? We can ask and God will give. Not necessarily *what* we ask for. But God doesn't mean us harm. God promises the Holy Spirit. Not a parking place. Not revenge or piles of happiness or success. God promises to give us God's own self. God stretches our souls to fill them with more of God, and make us holy and like Jesus. That's what every prayer *is*. A desire to be filled with God, overflowing to others.

And Jesus tells this story. Let's say someone comes to your house in the middle of the night and you have no bread (because, Jesus, *you* just said not to *store* too much bread! Anyway). And you bang on your friend's door. And your friend tells you to go away. Bad friend. If you keep knocking eventually you'll *manipulate* him into doing what you want. Right? Well, God is *not* a bad friend. God doesn't *need* to be manipulated. God will give us what we need. Not necessarily what we want. Not too much. Not too little. But bread. Forgiveness. Mercy. So then we can give those things to others. This is what prayer is. When we pray as a church we say to God, hey, we've taken in this guest as you commanded and they're hungry. Could you give us a little bread here God? God's not sleeping or annoyed. God is ready to give. God is not a bad father or a bad friend. God is nothing but mercy. I mentioned that the ones who pray the most find prayer hardest. Mother Teresa was asked by a famous journalist what she says when she prays. Nothing. I listen. What does God say when you listen? Nothing. God listens. Now the journalist was really confused. So she finished him off this way. "And if you can't understand that, then I can't explain it to you." Think of the two of them, mother Teresa and God, in each other's presence, quietly, not having to say anything, like an old married couple with no more secrets, just glad to be together. And then ask God if we can be like that one day. Here's what will happen. Something amazing. You ready for it? God will say yes. Amen.

ⁱ The observation is from Martin Copenhaver's most recent book.

ⁱⁱ It's Malcolm Guite.