

Matthew 6:7-13
“The Longing in the Lord’s Prayer”
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Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost & Open and Affirming Sunday,
June 27, 2021

Reading:

⁷ “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ “Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

In 1987 the Rock-n-roll band, U2, captured the longing of the age:

I have climbed the highest mountains.

I have run through the fields.

Only to be with you; only to be with you...

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for.

Their lead singer, Bono, once described their songs as “prayers of a kind.”

There’s a lot of longing going on in the Lord’s Prayer. We are too often oblivious to it, but Jesus’ prayer begins with a passionate desire for what God wants. He starts by honoring God’s name, which automatically embraces all of who God is and what God does. Next, Jesus cries out for God’s kingdom and rule to arrive and be real. Immediately after, he prays more specifically, “Let your will be done, here and now!”

“Your will be done.” The word for “will” is the Greek word *thelema*. This word is not anchored in volition, like “will power,” but in emotion and longing. It is not about obeying a righteous demand; *thelema* is used when speaking of the heart’s desires – *God’s heart’s desires*. Jesus says to God: “*Your will be done. What you want; let it happen.*”

So Jesus desires that the lion lie down with the lamb, that little children lead us, that justice and righteousness kiss, love be steadfast, respect and dignity natural. We sang his longing

in the first hymn: “O for a world where everyone respects each other’s ways, where love is lived and all is done with justice and with praise.” Oh, for a world...! Our Lord’s prayer is passionate.

Scholars also point out that it is impatient – a holy impatience. Jesus is dissatisfied with the status quo. He’s praying for more than what is. Granted, we only have translated words, not a tape that we can listen to, but the words tell us that the tone of his prayer is one of urgency: that what *will be* in heaven start anytime, but right now would be better!

Jesus instructed his disciples, you and me, to “pray like this.” He didn’t mean just to utter these words, but to feel the same passion.

Do you and I pray like this? Maybe *you* pray to God in this manner in your private, silent, or desperate moments, but my answer is “not usually and not really.” For example, when we pray the Lord’s Prayer together during worship, isn’t it usually *dispassionately*, in a unison monotone? “Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done?”

Now I know that the even-keel style of a prayer chant can be beautiful and effective. Praying the Psalms, for instance, can be like an underground drip irrigation system; it saturates the soul over time, but why do we avoid expressing aloud the longing of Christ?! As our musicians know, when we don’t sing from the diaphragm, we do music an injustice. This is true of prayer, as well. We are in danger of what Jesus warned his followers against: “heaping up *empty* phrases.”

I can imagine all sorts of reasons why we tamp down our prayers. We are probably not in touch with our own longing, let alone God’s, even though the bible and our faith instruct us on what God wants. We may also deny our desires, as if they are something to be ashamed of. Or are you afraid of being disappointed; is this why you don’t ask for what God longs?

This week there was so much hype about the consumer deals during Amazon Prime Day. I noticed that this year, the newscasts were giving them all kind of free advertising! In our society, buying and selling material things is considered success and the ultimate goal. This is one reason it is so easy for us to settle for lesser things than God’s will. Why pray for God’s will when you can gain the whole world instead? Our priorities are messed up, and this approach harms our prayer relationship with God too!

Another reason we may have trouble today praying with the passion that Jesus taught us is because loss and grief from the Pandemic has piled on and weighs us down.

Religion and worship traditions can be culprits too. They ought never domesticate the Holy Spirit and the Divine longing that has been planted in our souls! Our worship and prayer ought to be playful, colorful, physical, and real, sort of like a Pride parade! Jesus says, “Pray like this, with longing.”

Fortunately, starting today, the Lord’s Prayer can help us. Praying as Jesus did, with feeling and connection, can help us get in touch with our own true longing and align it with God’s.

Theologian Wendy Farley writes: *If we can connect with even the smallest hint of [God’s] desire, which emanates from the Divine image deep within us, then nothing, not even ourselves can break this thread that leads us home.*¹

¹Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), xviii.