

## Our Expedition: Pilgrims on God's Great Adventure Communicating



Luke 11:1-4. <read scripture passage from NRSV>



How we communicate with each other is important. A lack of communication or a miscommunication can have consequences that we don't expect. Over the last two weeks, I have enjoyed getting to know some of you better through the "Meet and Greet" sessions that you kindly organized. One of the questions that I asked at each of the homes was "How did you first come to Cornerstone?" There were two answers that came up again and again. The first was those who came through a personal invitation, through someone communicating directly with them; and the second was through the church website.

Ten years ago, not many people would have found us through a website. Technology is changing, and our communication methods are too. Newspapers, radio and television are no longer our only source of news. The last few years have seen us start to text, IM, tweet, blog, and use skype, facebook and youtube.

Each of these methods can be used for great good. But this week we found out yet again what happens when people use these tools irresponsibly. Shirley Sherrod lost her job in the US Department of Agriculture where she was overseeing rural development in Georgia. Why? Because someone posted a video clip on a blog of a speech that she gave. The clip quickly spread around the internet and a furor exploded. The clip that was shown was a 38-second sound bite that was taken totally out of context and appeared on the surface to be racist. Her whole speech was actually about racial reconciliation. In the department's haste to be politically correct, they believed what they saw on the blog and formed their opinions from this communication; she was dismissed before anyone doubled checked the facts.



The information that we choose to share with each other has consequences. Our behavior is affected by the communication we receive. And it is easier than ever to limit the viewpoints we are exposed to. What we read or watch informs our opinions. Marketers know this. They communicate messages deliberately. Advertisements are created to try to get us to change our behavior. If we see and hear the same message enough times we start to remember it and be affected by it. How many of these slogans through the years do you remember?<sup>1</sup>

Diamonds are forever (DeBeers); Just do it (Nike); The pause that refreshes (Coca-Cola); We try harder (Avis); Good to the last drop (Maxwell House); Breakfast of champions (Wheaties); Does she ... or doesn't she? (Clairol); Look Ma, no cavities! (Crest)

Gradually our behavior changes. Our identity is formed. Communication is important.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://adage.com/century/slogans.html> (accessed July 24, 2010).



Prayer is the way we communicate with God. Like all forms of communication, prayer changes our behavior and forms our identity. It bends our feelings, desires and thoughts. What we talk to God about is important. So what should we pray about? "Teach us to pray" said the disciples to Jesus. And Jesus taught them what we call today the Lord's Prayer.

These ancient words have been prayed in churches continuously through the generations ever since Jesus taught the first disciples. The words come to us with some adaptations. Matthew gives us a slightly different version and the Didache, a document written by the early church around 100 AD, is slightly different too, but a prayer in roughly this form has been prayed by Christians for over 2000 years.

At Cornerstone you have prayed this prayer from time to time although not usually every week. In a lot of churches around the world this is a prayer that is prayed every Sunday. And many Christians also pray using these words in their personal devotions.

As we pray the Lord's Prayer there is a deep sense in which we are joined to the spirits of generations of Christians in the past. We also teach it to our children and they will teach it to theirs, so that in a way we are also linked to those who follow us.

The original Aramaic that Jesus spoke has been translated into every language that Christians speak. Wherever there are people worshipping across the world this prayer is prayed.

When I was in seminary, I went on a trip to Africa. In Rwanda, we went to a church service. Because we were there as a group, everything was translated into English for us. Everything, except the Lord's Prayer, which we each recited it in our native tongue. There was a cadence and rhythm to it that stirred our souls. We were united in ways that go far deeper than words. Perhaps that was what the first Pentecost was like.

This prayer touches us in mystical ways that we cannot explain. We move out of our heads and thinking and move into our hearts and feeling. In the rehearsing of the familiar words we create within us a sense of God's presence that we can summon up as we pray. We are interconnected. We become the body of Christ.

A few moments ago we sang "this is the air we breathe" which reminded me of an article I read: One day a pastor was making visits to the nursing home and hospital and saw a number of elderly parishioners who were breathing with weakened bodies through an oxygen tube. She noticed though that when she prayed the Lord's Prayer with them, they prayed with strength and vigor.<sup>2</sup> Praying had become as natural to them as breathing.

But perhaps when a prayer becomes as natural to us as breathing it loses its meaning. It becomes rote. If we are not careful we teach it to our children and they have no idea of its meaning.

You've probably heard the joke where the little boy tells his mom that he knows what God's name is. What is it she asks? Harold, he says. You know, "Our Father who art in heaven, Harold be thy name." Or the little girl, who recites, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us some e-mail"

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3082> (accessed 7/19/2010).

Each phrase of the prayer causes us to form a mental image. The images from the prayer that would have been counter-cultural and radical in the first century have become domesticated. One of the stumbling blocks today around this prayer is the use of the word Father.



In today's society, males are not always the best role models. Not to be down on men, I might add that not all women are good models either. A social worker tells of visiting a prison shortly before Mother's Day and the inmates requested Mother's Day cards that she hastily went out to buy. So the next month she came prepared with cards for Father's Day but was surprised to get no requests.<sup>3</sup> Many prisoners are brought up by abusive fathers.

Today as we use the image of God as father, we have a tendency to overlay both our good and bad images of men onto God coming close to idolatry as we make God no better than ourselves. And we also project deity onto men, and assign a higher value to men than women.

God cannot be described by any single metaphor. The words we used only point to a truth. When we use our reason and think about it, we know that God is not human, and so is neither male nor female. We can only say that God is like a father, and in saying that, we are envisaging in our minds a perfect father. In the same way that we can have a personal relationship with our earthly father, we are verbalizing what we know and experience to be true: that we can have a personal relationship with God.

Like the sound bite of Shirley Sherrod which made her appear racist when taken out of context, the words of Jesus taken out of context lose their meaning. The father image has perhaps become so churchy that we miss the radical nature of what Jesus said. Jesus knew about abusive fathers and abusive rulers, but he engaged his tradition critically.

His was a patriarchal society, and privilege was socially conveyed onto men. The child of a king was greater than the child of an outcast. By calling God, "Father," Jesus was pointing out that God is the father of us all. The use of the word 'our' reverses the exclusiveness. We are all the King's children. Jesus gives us all a high lineage. It is a liberating message.

The word for father that Jesus used was "Abba" which is more like "daddy". It was a familiar term for a parent. He is conveying a close relationship like a parent with a child, like a loving, caring parent who wants the best for us.

Jesus was subverting violence, and asserting love. Using the term 'father' was life-giving, it was liberating, it was good-news and when we say "Our Father" today that is the spirit in which we are praying.

For some of you here, myself included, using the word "Father" is a comforting and helpful image, but for others it evokes too much pain. What we do in worship today shapes the tradition that we pass on. We need to ensure that we do not inflict further pain on our hurting sisters and brothers. We must not convey to future generations that some children of God have a higher status than others. The gospel message is good news for all of God's children.

The way that I have at present chosen to engage this issue is that when I pray the Lord's Prayer, I sometimes use the traditional Father language. As I say "our father," I mean it in a life-giving manner and in a way that is also enriching and comforting to me. At other times, I change the wording and

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<sup>3</sup> <http://sacredise.blogspot.com/2010/06/fatherhood.html> (accessed 7/22/2010).

use alternate words to express an image of God that is liberating in today's context, and to more directly communicate the good news. I found this very uncomfortable to do at first but now it is starting to shape me. There are also other translations and paraphrases that people have written. I also like to sometimes use the version from the New Zealand prayer book that I know you have used here occasionally.



The prayer continues with the petition, "Give us each day our daily bread." Bread. Not lots of possessions. Just what I need. Daily bread. One day at a time. Being grateful for our food today means not just being grateful for the earth and the sun and rain, and to the farmers, but to everyone involved in our long food chain.

Give US each day our daily bread. Who is the us? As we pray for our own daily bread, we are also praying for bread for others. But as we do so, we become aware that others are hungry. It calls us to conscience. What is the price of my daily bread? What about the damage we do to get our food? Do our ways defraud others of their daily bread? Is there justice in the way food is distributed? What about other resources like water, coal and oil?

This is a prayer about gratitude and responsibility.



Left to my own devices, I'm not sure I'd pray asking for daily bread. I take it for granted. My inclination is to pray for what I want and desire, not just for what I really need. I need Jesus to prod and poke me weekly and teach me how to pray faithfully. Praying the Lord's Prayer bends my thoughts, feelings and desires to what I am supposed to think, feel and desire.

It leads me to pray responsibly for justice and to think about how I need to change to be the presence and love of God to others. Prayer enlarges our awareness. Prayer changes us, and opens us to understand the world in fresh ways and moves us to change our actions. Prayer shapes us in the divine image.



Jesus continues with the next petition: "Forgive us our sins as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." Forgive us our sins. Not if/when we sin. We will sin, and others will hurt us. We are told not only to ask forgiveness but we are also expected to extend it.

"Forgive us our sins as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." We are asking God to extend mercy to us in the same degree to which we extend it. If we do not extend mercy, then we will not receive it. How much do we forgive others? This is challenging.



The use of the word indebted here points to us asking God to treat our sins as we treat other's monetary debts. This is scary stuff for us in the West when we realize that at least 80% of the world's population lives on less than \$10 a day.<sup>4</sup> How much mercy do we extend? Jesus is teaching us not just to pray with our lips but our lives.



If we listen to what we are praying then this prayer prayed regularly will play a role in changing who we are and what we wish for. The Lord's Prayer creates our spiritual understanding. Our identity is formed by regularly praying it. Praying for the kingdom to come moves us to identify with the Kingdom's values. We become the people that we pray to be. Prayer changes us. The Lord's Prayer reminds us what to pray for and challenges us. It opens us to the love of God.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats> (accessed 7/24/2010).

We are invited to see the world as Jesus sees it, to see the world's wounds as opportunities for healing and reconciliation, and to experience God's generosity by participating in it.

Thanks be to God!



I'd like to invite you now to say the Lord's Prayer with me. We do not all have to pray exactly the same words. On the screen will be the more traditional words that have been used by Methodists for generations. but I invite you to use whatever language is more appropriate for you.

If you'd like to say Our Parent, or Our Father and Mother, or Our Creator and gatherer of us all then please do so. If English is not your native tongue, or you speak another language well, then recite it in that language. If you come from other Christian backgrounds, you may be familiar with some slightly different phrasings that you may want to use.

Let us join our voices across time and distance and pray thoughtfully together the counter-cultural, risky, liberating prayer that Jesus taught his disciples.

Let us pray:



Our Father, who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name,  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who  
trespass against us.

*Our Father  
who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name,  
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done  
On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
And forgive us our trespasses  
As we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the kingdom,  
And the power,  
And the glory forever. Amen.*



And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power,  
and the glory forever. Amen