

SERMON: TEACH US HOW TO PRAY

By Rev. Dr. Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

24 July 2022 Luke 11:1-13

I and maybe some of you have grown up in families where daily prayer as a family played an important part in our lives it is a Samoan thing and one that our parents begin at sunrise and sunset with the midday prayer for food. Often for my siblings and I when we were right into our favourite television programme, mum and dad would walk in and say, it's time for our family devotion, turn the TV. Off. No consultation, negotiation that was just the way it was. I guess for me as a child and of others here who can relate to this too, prayer time was a serious part of our day where negotiations did not enter the equation. I used to huff and puff under my breath; gosh can't we just watch the last ten minutes of our programme then it will be all finished and we can do the prayer. So sometimes prayer time for as a child was a time of silent tantrums, which also included an opportunity to pray and thank God for times like this!

According to the texts assigned for this Sunday, the indispensability of prayer emerges from the fact that it puts those who pray in touch with the incredible generosity of God. "Successful prayer" depends not on the methods or strategies of the disciples (what time of day one prays or the posture one assumes), but on a listening God to whom petitioners are constantly referred.

In today's passage we have the shorter and earlier form of the Lord's Prayer. Luke brings it in a context, which teaches about prayer. It is just as much also teaching about God.

The prayer begins in a simple way: ‘Father.’ Jesus was one of those who gave the formal designation of God as the great father in heaven and creator a familiar tone: ‘father.’ Elsewhere we find traces of the common family term: ‘abba.’ It is not baby talk, but it does reflect the kind of intimacy one might expect in a family. Some of us call our father, tama, or pops or papa, abba is the more intimate form of father that Jesus uses in a similar fashion. It assumes a parent who is not remote but accessible, not violent and overbearing, but supportive and caring.

The supportive relationship Jesus has with the Father is not exclusive, but a model of the relationship which all can have. That is made possible because of the kind of God God is. This is a theme repeated elsewhere, not least in the image of the father in the parable of the prodigal son. Compassion and caring are central.

But what if one’s image of father is not loving and caring? What if one’s image of father is abusive and destructive? Jesus would have known about abusive fathers, just as he knew about abusive rulers. He used the ambiguous images of king and father because they were part of the Jewish tradition in which he was bought up in as a child too.

We like to think that the image of “father” as in the image of “mother” that many of us understand and relate to are positive, nurturing images that remind us of love and intimacy and the nurturing that we expect from parents in good families. However, I believe that interpreters of every generation have a responsibility to engage these images critically, helping people perceive where they bring life and where they bring destruction and pain and in some cases even death. This ambiguity needs to be named, because among us and within our communities there are many,

both women and men, for whom the image of father might also be one of destruction and abuse.

In our old testament reading from the book of Hosea, the God that Hosea and his family encounter is an angry God who talks of death and destruction because of the unfaithfulness of his people. He names the children of Hosea and Gomer, Jezreel, a nation that God will destroy, and then they had a daughter who God said to name her 'unloved' and then their third child, a son was named 'not-my-people.' But in all the despair God promises restoration 'one day you will be the children of the living God.' I cannot relate to this kind of God, one that is remote and angry, when we are surrounded with the despair and anger then often the God to whom we would pray to would seem distant and angry too, in fact God can seem totally absent during these sorts of times.

And so, when we pray we need to find images that reflect for us the love and nurturing that is possible, we need to find a language that invites the fatherless to come and feel nurtured and loved. There is the image of God as a mother hen who gathers her chicks under her wings and provides them with a warm resting place. We should not limit ourselves to the literal word but encourage an understanding of God that invites every experience of life to grasp the basics of God as love and compassion, healer, and peacemaker. And if that means finding alternatives to "father" then so be it. Prayer is about participation, not about rights and wrongs, correct address, and salutation, but about embracing the intimacy of a God who cares and walks with us through our grief and despair as well as our joys and successes.

Hallowing means respecting, treating as holy. This is fundamental to our relationship with God and to all other relationships. Acknowledging the

holiness, the dignity, the otherness of the other, must not be reduced to a metaphor of cringing before one who is more powerful, even if that is dressed up respectably as obeisance before the almighty. For then it reinforces the assumption that might is right and the bigger and stronger is the better. Such thinking often results in abusive relationships. Parents emulate their god. People emulate their god. The victims are disempowered.

Growing up in an evangelical, conservative church meant that when it was our turn to pray we had learnt the language and style from our parents and role models in church. There is a correct way of praying, I was taught the ACTS, adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication (I never questioned what supplication meant, but I figured it was important). Later, when I became a teenager and got involved in the Jesus crusades at Alexandra Park Racecourse I learnt to pray in another fashion. Suddenly the words were no longer words but were attached to a feeling of intimacy and empathy. I finally felt that God really did love me, I was caught up in the charisma or grace of God during that seventy's decade. But later, when I became a Youth leader in church, I witnessed a new kind of prayer emerging amongst the youth. As national youth co-ordinator of the church I attended many youth services all over the country and the style of prayer that was prayed was the other extreme to the one I had grown up with. No longer the remote God but a God of everyday language. I was talking with my nieces and nephew about prayer and one thing that they noticed amongst their peers is how prayer can be used to say something to someone without having to say it their face. For example, "Father God, sorry that such and such got a speeding ticket today, he's just a know it all and needs humbling" Using prayer

to get others in trouble, or to say the things in public that others want kept secret.

There is no right or wrong way to pray. Prayer is about a conversation with God, who is creator, or lover, peacemaker, healer, friend, counsellor. The higher up we put God like all powerful, almighty, majestic, king of kings then the further away our experience of God can get. Prayer is personal, we don't need to recite every incident that has happened during the week as if we are reading the morning herald. God isn't deaf or blind nor is God monolingual in that we can only use English or the language of the church. God doesn't need a shopping list of things to remember. Why do we need to tell God everything like God has no idea what is happening in our lives and in the world around us? Just keep it simple and intimate, prayer is a time for intimacy and a time to be listened to by someone who cares and understands our experience, it is not about passing or failing.

God is not just 'father' and 'king.' God is not just male. God is not a claimer of privilege. God is like the mum or dad who really cares (and confronts us with reality), who is holy and makes you feel holy. So, prayer is an activity of intimacy and awe and thus a model for all relationships; it is the language of fellowship and relationship.

Our relationship with God is possible not because of what we are or do but because of who God is and what God has done for us.

Luke continues, what father or parent among you if his son asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?"

the *egg* is a symbol of hope and resurrection, which is why they are an Easter thing.

But here, when Jesus is warning the disciples against just 'saying prayers', he contrasts the egg with the *scorpion*. Scorpions are nasty things. They don't kill their prey with their poison which is full of neurotoxins, they just paralyse it, so the scorpion can eat it alive.

The scorpion here symbolizes the danger of looking backwards. The sting of death and paralysis is always behind.

Prayer is rooted in the kindness and generosity of God, thus making it possible for even unworthy, stumbling disciples to offer petitions for their journey. What they receive is the Spirit, the ultimate resource for mission. Amen.