

HOW TO WANT STUFF: A SERMON ON THE LORD'S PRAYER
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, July 25, 2010
Text: Luke 11:1-13

On the last weekend of our vacation, Christine and I took the opportunity to attend church on Saturday evening at a church in Michigan where her brother plays the organ. This gave me an excuse on Sunday morning to watch a bit of television that I don't usually see. Including a little preaching. Broadcast from an arena in . . . a large state. The preacher shared the stage with a large sculpture of Earth. Tens of thousands of people listened eagerly as he propounded *a theory about how to ask for stuff and get it*. Want it **now**, he taught. Have "now faith." That's the way to get whatever it is you want. That's what the Bible says. Have faith that, if you want something, whatever it is, God will give it to you today. That works better than leaving the timing up to God or circumstances.

If I sound critical of him, I hope you don't think I'm just jealous of his large audience. Jesus taught that it is not a good idea to follow a crowd. But I feel a need to give you a better answer than that preacher was offering. If people want to know how to ask for stuff and get it, well, there's no better place to begin than with what Jesus says in today's Gospel.

Jesus knew, and he said our Father in heaven knows, we need stuff. All kinds of stuff. He told people they should not be *anxious* about things like food and clothing, because "your Father knows you have need of these things." Luther worked a great shopping list into the Small Catechism, saying "Daily bread includes everything needed for this life, such as food and clothing, home and property, work and income, a devoted family, an orderly community, good government, favorable weather, peace and health, a good name, and true friends and neighbors." And so on. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with our wanting to be healthy, wanting to be fed, wanting a car or a horse or a bicycle, wanting to get married, wanting to see Rome, whatever. Appetites and needs are part of our created being, and in our society today they are very complicated.

But the *way* you and I want stuff affects how we go about getting it, and that can cause an awful lot of trouble in this world. The apostle James wrote in his letter that "You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts." Wanting gets dangerous when it turns into coveting.

So, how are we *supposed* to want stuff? Do we have to stifle our desires? Channel them? Are we supposed to be content with 50%? Does the Bible offer us a template of moderate wishes? Are we free to take whatever nobody else wants? If we are meek, will we simply inherit the earth?

The Lord's Prayer addresses the question of how to want stuff. Not just how to *ask*, but—deeper—how to want and what to want. Jesus taught it to his disciples in order to form them, to show how their faith should inform their thinking about everything.

Two slightly different versions of the Lord's Prayer are found in Matthew and Luke. The version we use in church is not exactly either. But the differences are not nearly as important as what they have in common. Which is that *our prayers to God for any and all of our needs should always be placed within the context of a fundamental desire that the world should start belonging to God again*. And not just to any god, not to one that looks like Mars or Venus, not to the indifferent god of deism, but to the God whom we know by getting to know Jesus Christ. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, that is what we are doing with our needs and wishes. We are placing them in the context of our faith, our desire that the God whom we know in Jesus Christ should rule.

We need "daily bread"—bread symbolizes all the stuff that keeps us going. Every day, you and I spend time working to get those things and fretting about what we lack. We also want to be freed from sin—our sins against others, and theirs against us. We don't like carrying bad feelings around. We need all our relationships healed. And we don't want to get hurt. We are afraid of various sorts of threats. So those are the things we would naturally pray for, if we had any hope that someone could help us.

But before we offer any of those petitions of the second half of the Lord's prayer, we take just a moment to say "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come." Jesus tells us here that when we want something from God, we should want this first. As he said once, "Seek first the kingdom of God, and that everything should be the way God wants it, and all these other things will be added to you."

Jesus wants us to keep a bigger picture in mind, when we place our wants and needs and hopes and dreams before God. And not just any bigger picture, but the bigger picture of holiness and righteousness and justice and mercy and freedom and compassion and love for others, which Jesus took such pains to put before us when he announced the kingdom of God was coming.

If we do not, if we nourish personal dreams and ambitions *in isolation from God's will*, even in opposition to God's will, we may succeed but we might end up like the villains in Jesus' teaching. Like the one who built bigger barns and planned to enjoy the rest of his life eating, drinking, and being merry—after all, he got what he wanted—but, sad man, that night his soul was required of him.

It is so with everything we want. All our wishing and wanting needs to be trained to be congruent with God's wishing and wanting. The Lord's Prayer is a wonderful exercise bike on which we may train ourselves even as we express our own desires to God.

Much more could be said about the Lord's Prayer, but let me conclude by saying a little about the good news that is in the prayer.

It is interesting to think what Jesus did *not* tell his disciples, when they asked him to teach them how to pray. He did not tell them to prepare carefully, settle all their debts first, make a sacrifice, wear a hair shirt, or go to a special, quiet place. He did not give them some very long and difficult prayer to be recited precisely. He did not say, you'll have to get a pastor to pray for you; or lots and lots of people.

He just said, ask. We do not have to puff ourselves up to get what we want from God. We do not have to make ourselves look nice, to get God's attention. We simply have to ask. Our very need is our most attractive quality. We just have to think of ourselves as neighbors of God who are desperate for a loaf of bread, and go wake him up. He will help. Or think of ourselves as God's children, who need breakfast. God will take care of us. We know this because we have seen God in Jesus Christ. And that is good news.

And what we will get right now, free of charge, as our wanting gets re-formed by Jesus' prayer, is—did you notice the surprise ending of the gospel?—what we will get from the Father is . . . the Holy Spirit. That means that right now, we become the answer to God's prayer, as we grow in our concern and love for others, and as we act on that to improve the lives of others. And we become the answer to each other's prayers.

I am tempted to go on and on, and make more observations about how the Lord's Prayer works, how it is organized. It is my favorite Bible passage, and of course more people use it more often than any other part of the Bible. I think the theology of Jesus can be read off this prayer. There are still unsolved mysteries about its composition and its meaning.

But to go on and on would not be in the spirit of our Lord, who opposed long prayers . . . and might be opposed to long sermons. Amen.