

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for March 6, 2011
Lessons: Exodus 3:6-12 and Matthew 6:7-13

COMMITTING OUR HOPES TO GOD'S FUTURE

Do you remember the name Ben Weir? Ben is a Presbyterian minister who was teaching in Iran during its turmoil in the 1980's. He was kidnaped by a group that evolved into Hezbollah, and his release was secured through the deal that came to be known as the Iran-Contra Affair. In 1986, our General Assembly made Ben its moderator, the highest elected office in our church. He wrote the book, *Hostage Bound, Hostage Free*.

During his days of dark confinement, before one of his captors gave him a Bible, Ben Weir kept his mind focused in faith and hope by recalling scripture passages and hymns he knew by heart. His account started a turnaround in my own thinking about the value of memorization. I had seen (and still see) the downside of it – the repetition of profound words without much thought – but I went on to learn for myself in less extreme situations what Ben Weir had told me through his book of the value to faith and hope of words known by heart.

For us, the Lord's Prayer is so familiar that we can recite it without thinking, but as our lesson from Matthew shows, Jesus was not just giving his disciples a short prayer to pray and be done with it but a guide for looking to God with both trust and hope. Each petition of the prayer invites endless further thoughts, prayers, and changes in a person's life. "Forgive us our debts *as we forgive our debtors*," can send a jolt through someone trying to follow Jesus but also nursing a grudge. Truly forgiving someone is not easy. I believe that if the offense was intentional and truly harmful, forgiveness should not come easily. When we misrepresent forgiving as mere excuse making or minimizing the importance of the breach, we cheapen the gospel. Jesus did not give his life to excuse hatred, abuse, exploitation, and cruelty but to deliver us from them and redeem the lives of the victims and of the perpetrators. An easy time of it indicates that either the offense was trivial or the forgiveness shallow. Deep wounds must be treated to be healed. Ointment is enough for scrapes, but deeper cuts can become infected and may leave scars.

What I ask you to look at with me this morning, though, is the reliance of Jesus' way of praying upon two crucial factors: the caring presence of God in this world but also the promises of God for a new kind of world that is emerging. The Lord's Prayer or "Our Father" – as Catholics call it, emphasizing the relationship on which faith depends – expresses a profound commitment to radical change, not just in the spirit, mind, or soul of

the believer, but in the whole created order. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” calls for a complete change in the interpersonal, political, social, and economic orders of life. Concern for the other person or group must override greed and lust for our own advantage. Fairness must outweigh personal gain. Peace must become the product of justice rather than the luxury of the victors. The human heart must learn to prize redemption and reconciliation rather than vengeance. The widening gap between this world’s have’s and its far more numerous have-not’s must be closed, and earth’s people must come to want it closed and kept closed. Those are very tall orders.

At the end of his popular book, *A Brief History of Time*, the theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking writes:

However, if we discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable by everyone, not just by a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we should know the mind of God. (p. 193)

No, Dr. Hawking, it is when we have learned to care enough to give up our own advantage to help raise up the impoverished children of a group we neither trust nor like that we shall know, in part but in truth, the mind of God. Compassion, not reason, is the key to God’s heart, and while we are divided and conflicted creatures, God’s heart and mind are one, and when we understand God’s heart we will discover a higher reason in which justice and compassion make sense and govern all that will ever again make sense to us. God is not to be found in a *theory of everything* but in the self-giving, redemptive love that took Jesus to the seeming annihilation of his life by suffering, shame, and death. Jesus says our Father in heaven is kind to the ungrateful and undeserving, and he calls us to be perfect in just that way. The mystery of God lies there and not in the stars, for God’s truth is redemptive love, which is also the truly creative power of God.

Toward what do we extend our personal hopes and dreams? The saying, “Hitch your wagon to a star,” is interesting because it brings together the plodding of human life with all its limitations and bumpy rides – the wagon – and the sometimes ridiculously high yearnings of the human soul. Jesus hitches his wagon, so to speak, to the triumph of God’s redemptive love over all that hurts and destroys, and in so doing he commits himself to a victory he must attain by laying his life down for the sake of others.

The prayer does, however, keep our feet on the ground. “Give us this day our daily bread” or, in its other translation, “our bread for the next day” is the prayer of day laborers

who live from hand to mouth: one denarius (a single coin) for a day's work, one denarius for a day's bread. How can anybody "get ahead" that way? It's like ancient Israel's manna that could be collected only for the one day and not stored because it would become wormy overnight. Is that any way to live? Let's think a little more deeply and honestly. Is there truly any other way a human being can live life, other than day by day? Jesus, however, transforms the unsettling truth of our life's uncertainty into a way of trust that liberates us from fear because we no longer see our lives as dependent upon chance and the luck of the draw, but neither do we fall into the delusion of self-sufficiency and pretend to command our own destinies. He lifts us above being victims but not by becoming greedy takers.

As Jesus himself reminds us, life is more than bread, but when we pray the Lord's Prayer, bread can symbolize all our valid needs for life lived in faith and in hope for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done. God delights in giving life, but we receive the gift by sharing it, not by taking and hoarding it. Life is not my possession; neither can I secure it by having many possessions. How much would I need to accumulate so I would no longer need to trust God for each day of life?

"Do not bring us to the test, but deliver us from evil" or, it may be translated, "from the evil one." Just as it is a serious evasion of our responsibility as human beings if we blame all the harm we do to each other and to ourselves upon a figure of evil, Satan, so it is a foolish overestimation of our power to control our own lives if we imagine that good and evil are ours to choose or even to recognize always with clarity. Only when we live by God's grace and not our own virtue and only as we find goodness in Jesus' way of self-giving love can we distinguish more clearly what is helpful from what is harmful, what matters greatly from what matters little, and what is just from what is unjust. If I think I can master my own goodness, then I have fallen into the oldest and deadliest trap of all – the knowledge of good and evil that pushes God out of my life because it needs no mercy, no grace, no forgiveness. It helps, I believe, to remember that human evils arise from our lack of empathy and compassion, not from our lack of self-sustained virtue.

I hope I have succeeded somewhat in sharing the Lord's Prayer as a daily expression of hope and re-commitment to hitching our dreams and desires to God's own. For me, the greatest wonder of all is that God, the eternal One, has committed so deeply and permanently to us, the short-lived creatures of dust, and has refused to have a future as God unless it can be as *our God*. That's amazing beyond words. God has refused to go on without us, to have a future that does not include us. What a terrible choice for God to make. Where else could it lead but to a cross? And when we wonder how we limited and sometimes even cruel human beings can possibly go forward into God's promised future, we get the same answer God gave to the self-doubting Moses, "I will be with you." Amen.