

You may remember a few weeks ago we had a TV crew in the building, filming an investigative story for CNBC. That story aired Thursday night. It was not about us; the film crew simply wanted some shots of normal Christians at worship. The story was about Gerald Payne and Greater Ministries International out of Tampa. The leader of that church went to jail along with 4 or 5 of his colleagues. I taped the Thursday program and watched it. The shots of our sanctuary were fillers, they didn't use or show our name or faces, and we were in no way associated with the outfit being investigated. But, if even a small piece of that stuff is true, those guys really do need to be in jail.

They were running a ponzi scheme, getting new money from new investors/donors to pay off old ones, and pocketing millions in the process. Many of their victims lost all they had. What horrified me, as I watched clips of their “worship” (and I use the term loosely) was they were using religious language to do it, and nothing they said had anything remotely to do with the Christian gospel. It was, “God wants you to be rich, and will double your money.” They called it a Faith Promise Plan, and guaranteed that if you gave them 5,000 dollars, in 17 days you would get \$10,000. That would be the sign of God's blessing, they said, (“The Bible doesn't say God loves the poor, but the poor in Spirit.”) and they said “Trust us.” And a lot of desperate or deceived people did. CNBC filmed a big piece of the story in Birmingham, because it was someone from Birmingham who finally blew the whistle on these guys.

There is so much wrong with all that it would be hard to know where to start, but most of it is obvious to you. God is not some sort of magic being, who wants us to prove our faith by mortgaging our house and giving it to a fellow with too much hair gel. Nor is God bound by some formula to give some rate of return. Nor is the Christian life about getting rich.

In contrast, to that whole way of thinking, there is our Gospel lesson for this morning: One of the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." It's not "teach us *how* to pray," which would be a question of technique. Teach us to pray - as if to ask, “teach us to live with hearts open to God.” And that is how Jesus – even after giving some specific content – seems to understand and answer the question.

He tells them what to include in a personal prayer, and goes on to give a sort of negative example. If you go to a friend at midnight to borrow bread, and keep pestering him, he'll finally get up and do it. Keep searching for God (knock and the door will open, search and you will find), because if normal people will answer inappropriate knocking, how much *more* will God, who is *trying* to give us the Holy Spirit, *wanting* for us to receive the offered grace? That is the gist of Jesus' long answer, after saying “Pray like this...” It is whatever words you use, keep praying, keep knocking, keep searching. God is not trying to hide from you.

One way we explain this is to say – the Christian faith is personal, but never private. It is a public faith. In our epistle lesson Paul is writing to people (in the Colossae church) who didn't get that,

who exactly thought that God was hidden, that holiness was some secret that you could only gain by special knowledge. You may remember in the sermon a couple of weeks ago, we talked about how the Colossians were being led astray by Gnostic teachers who had an elaborate and complicated view of a hidden spiritual world populated by warring spirits, and you had to contend with that world to get to God. Paul used their own language, in writing to them, to say, “No. Simply continue in Christ as you were taught, live in him, be thankful.” Paul went so far as to force a choice – the convoluted world of angelic (or elemental) spirits, or Jesus Christ. Antithetical choices, and Paul finally says – don’t get caught up in this nonsense. Even if there *were* these elemental powers, the Risen Christ has publicly disarmed all authorities, and you were baptized into Christ, and are risen with him.

But in contrast, let’s turn back to the Gospel lesson, to see what is in this prayer Jesus told us to pray. Obviously you know it – you pray it every Sunday. This is Luke’s version we read this morning; Matthew has a longer one, and it is no in Mark or John. It is pretty simple: Father, your name be holy. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive our sins as we forgive others. Do not bring us to the time of trial.”

Jesus uses “Abba”, in addressing God, not the formal “Abinu” which would have normally been used in Jewish prayer. Some have said it is like saying, “Daddy,” although that correlation is not entirely right either. What it does is change the parenthood, the fatherhood, of God from a theological proposition to an intimate relationship. The Lord of the universe cares personally for individuals. Father, your name be holy – and God’s name IS God’s nature (Exodus: God says “Eyeh ser eyeh”; I am who I am, or will be who I will be.) Give us this day our daily bread – really a prayer for the poor, whose wage was (or is) a daily one, and without which they and their families did not eat. Forgive our sins for we forgive others. God’s forgiveness is not automatic, but we ourselves can only receive it when our hearts melt enough to know what forgiveness *means*.

This is the piece at the heart of the prayer for me – that which sums it all up. Give us this day our daily bread. Give us enough to eat for today. How different that is from the outfit in the CNBC story, taking God’s name in vain. But that is too easy, to say “Thank God we are not like *those* guys!” The real question is, how different is that from how we live out our own lives? We need to pray this prayer – “give us this day our daily bread.”

Janis Joplin used to sing a song that lampooned our acquisitiveness.: “O Lord, won’t you give me a Mercedes Benz. My friends all have Porsches, I must make amends... O Lord, won’t you give me a color TV....a night on the town.” What we are in danger of forgetting, in our planning and our investing and – in our society – all our accumulating, is our dependence on God. Without the gifts from God the Maker, we have not even air to breathe. Without God’s providence, we have no life. Our need to trust God is a sign of our creatureliness, our created-ness (we are *not* God, *not* the Maker). It is a first step in spiritual development, to know who is God and who is not. And when we pray for daily bread, we are reminded of that.

When the Israelites had fled Egypt, and were in the wilderness, at death’s door, their prayer for sustenance was granted. God sent manna in wilderness. This was the sap exudation of the tamarisk tree, although the Israelites called it “manna” (“What is it?”) The point is a people of God who recognize their dependence on the Creator. Manna was highly perishable. You had to gather it that day and use it that day. You couldn’t stockpile it. God sent daily bread.

In the end, we are not any farther ahead in the eyes of God by feeling superior to the folk who were hoodwinked by the scam artists that CNBC reported on. And we are not any farther ahead in the eyes of God by feeling superior to Gerald Payne himself. It is for each of us to ask for daily bread, ourselves. Just for this day. To depend on God.

Obviously God's blessings can't be bought, and you don't prove your faith by giving your savings over to a fly-by-night outfit promising nearly-instant blessings.. But beyond that – not even our good works or getting our hearts in the right place secure the blessings of God. Those are already there. Grace itself is a gift from God. Our flaws and failings and creature-liness point us in useful ways to a greater truth – that we are not God, and we have to ask for daily bread. We cannot make the Kingdom come, but we can be signs of it, point to it . One of those reminders happens every month (next week) when we come to the Lord's Table, and are reminded there of our dependence on God. In the Sacrament itself, Jesus is our daily bread.

It is why we need God and need the Christian community. By ourselves, we human critters are flawed, incomplete, and sometimes broken. But even that is an occasion for grace, a chance to turn to the Maker, and seek the heart of God. Songwriter Leonard Cohen said it this way:

“There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in.”

Loving God, give us, just today, our daily bread. Amen.