

**Luke 11: 1-13**  
**July 25, 2010**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**

Last week I began by saying that labels are dangerous—even good ones, as illustrated by the story of the “good” Samaritan. As we saw then, the parable is in fact a protest against “being good” as virtue to be pursued. Instead it is an outcome of being faithful to God. This week we have another dangerous label. In many ways it is more dangerous than “good” being applied to the Samaritan.

Now before I say anything else I want you to be patient with me. In preparing this sermon and reflecting on this text *I* was challenged. And it is my job as preacher to challenge you with the thoughts with which God has challenged me. The label I am lifting up is the one which we have applied to the prayer Jesus teaches his disciples: “the Lord’s Prayer”.

Before addressing this label directly, let’s take a look at the passage as a whole. If you have your Bible open you will notice that the passage immediately preceding the one we just heard is the teaching which takes place with Martha and Mary. Jesus’ teaching is about the priority of a prayerful life. Jesus tells Martha that in life only one thing is necessary: It is a heart that seeks to listen to God. It is from this “one thing” that all true and fruitful life comes.

Immediately following this teaching Luke places us in an unnamed place where Jesus is praying. Coincidence? I think not! Luke means for us to notice that Jesus walks the talk. He is sitting at God’s feet and listening to him.

It is when the disciples observe Jesus praying that they make the request which prompts Jesus to teach the prayer we pray every week. The request is important and we need to understand what the disciples are asking. The request is a simple one: “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”

What the disciples knew is that every teacher has a group of students who gather around to be instructed in the teacher’s philosophy and method of learning. This was the practice throughout the ancient world. The Greek philosopher Socrates and all of the classical philosophers had such groups of students. Jewish rabbis had a similar following. John the Baptist was yet another teacher who attracted followers who sought to be trained in his world view and the practice of his teaching. Let me remind you that the root meaning of the word we translate “disciple” means “student.” The goal of teaching is to enable the student to continue on in the path of the teacher. Discipleship is putting the learning into practice.

Like every teacher of the time John had a prayer he taught. Therefore, when Jesus’ disciples (aka students) ask Jesus to teach them to pray *as John taught his disciples*, they are asking that Jesus do what any other teacher would do for his students. They were coming to Jesus as a *rabbi*- the Hebrew word for *teacher*.

The prayer that Jesus teaches is a thoroughly Jewish prayer. Like all Jewish prayers it begins by addressing the God as the Holy One beyond all human understanding.

Father, Holy be your name.

It places the purposes of the one God before for all human desires and aspirations:

*Your kingdom come.*

Only then does the prayer presume to make requests to God:

Give us each day our daily bread and forgive our sins as we forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.

In Matthew's Gospel the prayer is more elaborate. This is more bare bones and is kept simple to highlight the essential parts of the prayer. This prayer is, in short a teaching tool, a guide to prayer. The idea is to learn the prayer by heart and then to allow God's Spirit to speak *through* the prayer to the depths of the soul.

Friends I cannot emphasize this point forcefully enough. Jesus never intended for this prayer for the exclusive use of a select group of believers. It was a teaching tool drawn from the very heart of the spiritual life of Israel to help women and men who were *part of the covenant of Abraham and Moses* to deepen their communion with the Holy One of Israel.

It is one of the tragedies of Christian history that this prayer became "the Lord's Prayer." It has taken a simple guide to approach the God of all times, people and places and made it a prayer said by a select group. Why, you may ask, is this so? I offer two reasons:

First, by calling this "*the Lord's*" prayer, we identify Jesus the teacher, the Palestinian rabbi, as the messiah who died on the cross and rose from the dead. And for Christians that is who he is. But for Jews and Muslims Jesus is a prophet, a great teacher, but not the messiah. By calling the prayer "*the Lord's* prayer" we lift it out of the setting of shared experience and make it something Jesus never intended—a prayer exclusively for Christians.

You may object, "Wait, was not that what Jesus was doing—creating Christians?" I reply, "I don't think so." I believe Jesus was seeking, like all prophets and teacher, to

deepen Israel's connection to the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. Like many reformers he was not trying to create a new religion. His heart was in helping all people find a meaningful and life altering relationship with God.

The second reason this is tragic is that having called Jesus the Messiah we then blamed the Jews for killing Jesus and have justified centuries of murder and oppression against people with whom we have far more in common than we have difference. If I am Jewish why would I pray a prayer in whose name millions of my people have been killed and discriminated against?

My personal feeling is that it will not help anything to change the name of the prayer. Some call it the "Jesus prayer;" but I don't think that accomplishes much. Maybe we might call it "Our Lord's Prayer" which at least recognizes that while Jesus is for many of us, "*Our Lord and Savior*" he is not such for many other faithful people.

This morning I want to suggest that as we pray this prayer we ask God to become more than the prayer of Our Lord. I ask that we ask God to place us with the first students of Jesus and to receive this prayer as a guide to approach the God who was his heavenly father as well as ours and who is the heavenly parent of all humanity. So that as we pray we link arms in the common hope that in the prayer as preserved in Matthew, *God's will* be done for all people and all creation, "on earth as it is in heaven." Amen.