

Formed by Jesus: When You Pray
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
February 11, 2024 AM Sermon
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Luke 10:38 -11:4

As a pastor who's been doing this for a while, it's always a rush when the Holy Spirit opens your eyes so that you suddenly see an old text in a new way. I had some of that this week as I studied the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's prayer; what could be more familiar than the Lord's prayer? I've prayed it thousands of times and so have you. And yet, this week, I saw something I hadn't seen before. There's an interesting connection between the Mary and Martha story which comes right before our passage in Luke, and Jesus' teaching on prayer in our passage. The Mary and Martha story helps us understand the Lord's Prayer.

How so? Well, what's going on in the Martha and Mary story? You just heard me read it, so you know that it's a story of two women who have different perspectives. Martha is "worried and upset about many things." Martha is a list maker, a worrier who can't rest her mind or her hands until she crosses off everything on her to-do list. Mary, by contrast, puts aside her worries and her to-do list and sits at Jesus' feet. She puts aside her worries and opens her heart to her Lord. Jesus loves both Martha and Mary. Jesus is tender with both Mary and Martha. But he thinks Mary has chosen what is better. Jesus thinks Mary's approach is more life giving.

Sometimes when we ministers preach on this passage, we like to talk about the difference between Mary and Martha and we say: "Are you a Martha or a Mary?" I think I've done that. That's maybe not the most helpful way to think of the passage. The truth is, all of us have an inner Martha and an inner Mary competing for our attention. Our lives are filled with duties and bills, and tests and deadlines and expectations, and we know that we have to deal with these things. The laundry will not do itself people! And yet we know that our soul needs care too! And we know that Jesus tells us that the care of the soul is the most important thing; it is the one thing needful. We need to spend time at the feet of Jesus. So the Mary voice and the Martha voice both compete for airtime in our head.

Both voices are important. Everyone needs a Martha voice. A person without any Martha voice is out of balance. Eventually someone has to do the dishes. Even monks and mystics have to make their beds. The trouble starts when your Martha voice starts to take over. Because the Martha voice tells you that if you just work harder and plan better and add a few more life hacks you can take control of your world. You end up in a flurry of busyness while your spirit is exhausted and irritated.

If we're honest, for many of us, myself included, our Martha voice has a way of dominating our day. In our passage Jesus is helping us to keep our Martha voice in its proper place. He does that by giving us a discipline. In our passage, Jesus teaches us a simple version of the Lord's prayer. And if we pray this prayer every day, the Holy Spirit will use it to keep our lives properly ordered. Through this prayer Jesus is structuring the priorities of our life and keeping our Martha voice and our Mary voice in proper alignment.

So, how is Jesus shaping our lives through this prayer? To answer that let's go through Luke's simple version of the Lord's prayer in the order Jesus lays it out. We will divide the prayer into three movements.

Movement one: The prayer starts with one single word: Father. When Jesus teaches us to pray, he doesn't start with a request, he doesn't teach us to ask for something, he doesn't even teach us to start with a praise and thanksgiving; he starts us with a relationship. As you orient your life, as you meet your day, the first thing Jesus does is grab you by your shoulders and he turns your face away from all your worries and problems, and he turns your face towards God, and when you turn you see the face of a loving Father.

Father. We are so used to using that title for God, but when Jesus referred to God as Father that was a revolutionary thing. In the Old Testament, Father was not a common image for God. There are only a handful of times when God is called Father in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Father is the dominant image for God. He is called Father more than 300 times in the New Testament.

In the pagan world, the gods were the furthest thing from a loving Father. The pagan gods were powerful, but they were proud and violent and prone to mood swings. You had to flatter them and appease them if you wanted their favor. If you were a person who turned your face to a pagan god every morning, your life

would be a life of fear and flattery and calculation. But when Jesus turns your face towards your heavenly Father he is getting you properly oriented to the world and to your life. You do not live under the rule of some bad-tempered Roman God, you live under the care of a loving Father, a God who knows your name, who counts the hairs on your head, who cares for you.

John Stott, the great British preacher who was one of the great Christian preachers of the 20th century and really influential in the evangelical world. He used to begin his morning with the same prayer every day, and that prayer always began with a cheerful “Good Morning Heavenly Father! Good Morning Lord Jesus! Good Morning Holy Spirit!” Does that sound a little too familiar to you? Too cheerful? I like it. I think it’s getting at the Spirit of Jesus’ prayer. When you start your prayer this way you remind yourself that whatever else is going on in the world and whatever else is going on in your life, at the center of this world is a loving Father who knows and cares about you.

So in movement one of the prayer, Jesus puts you in a Mary place. He pulls you away from your Martha worries and sits you at the feet of your heavenly Father, joyful in the orbit of his love.

In movement two of the prayer, Jesus moves the prayer into a place where we are now talking about priorities and plans and things that need to get done. But notice whose plans and priorities they are. Father, Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. When we wake up in the morning, we are most likely to be thinking about our kingdom: our work, our family, our stuff. Our inner Martha wants to have the first word of the day and she wants us to pick up our to-do list. Left to our own devices our to-do list will become the story of our day. Jesus wants a different rule a different story to rule our day. The story of the Kingdom. The story of a God who will not give up on this world, who will redeem it, and who will do it through the love and sacrifice of his Son.

Our stories are uncertain things, we know from hard experience that we can make all the plans we want to for our health, for our children, for our work, and those plans can come apart in an instant. One call from the doctor, one business failure, one family divide that keeps getting wider and everything falls to the ground. God’s kingdom will never fall to the ground. God’s name will be hallowed. His Kingdom will come. His will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven.

So in the first two movements of his prayer Jesus turns our face towards the love of our heavenly Father, and then to the certainty of his plans and promises. You can see Jesus minimizing our Martha voice – which is worried and upset about many things, and putting us in a very Mary place where we are silent before the mystery of his love.

It’s only after he’s put us at the feet of the Father’s love and promises, that he lets the prayer turn towards our Martha concerns. This is the third movement of the prayer. Here we start asking for help with our stuff. What’s interesting is what’s not included in this prayer. It’s interesting to think of the things that Jesus doesn’t teach us to pray for in this essential prayer. He doesn’t teach us to ask for healing, either for our sicknesses or for the sicknesses of the people we love. He doesn’t teach us to pray for safety for ourselves and our loved ones. He doesn’t teach us to pray for personal success in our work.

To be clear, that doesn’t mean we can’t ask for these things. In both my personal prayers and in our prayers together as a congregation, we pray for each other’s health and each other’s safety. In my personal prayers I’m praying for the success of myself and my love ones. Lord help me to be clear in my sermon today. Lord, please bring healing to those sick people in the bulletin! Help them! Lord keep my daughter safe on the roads as she drives to Chicago. I pray those kinds of prayers all the time, and so do you. Those are fine prayers and there are other places in the Bible where people pray prayers like this. But Jesus obviously doesn’t want us to start there. In the last movement of the prayer Jesus teaches his disciples and us to ask for three things. Three fundamental things.

Give us each day our daily bread. Lord God I don’t need wealth and big success; just give me enough strength to do what I need to do today. Give me the food I need to meet the challenges of today. Give me the daily manna for today’s journey. This is a deeper and more fundamental prayer than a prayer for health. If you’ve been diagnosed with a serious disease, say you’ve just been diagnosed with a serious form of Leukemia, how do you pray? Of course you pray for healing. That’s completely appropriate. But in teaching you to pray for daily bread Jesus is teaching you to pray something deeper and more fundamental than a prayer for healing, “Lord I want to be healed, but whatever the future holds, whatever you have in store for me, whether that’s

sickness or health, whether that's riches or poverty, give me the daily strength to be your child and do what I need to do." I'm ready for whatever you send Lord; just make me faithful on the way.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive everyone who sins against us. In this second request Jesus is shaping us to be people who keep grace at the center of our lives. Lord, let me know myself as a person who needs forgiveness every day. Lord, let me know myself as a person who is totally dependent on your grace. And let me be a person who is willing to give that same grace and forgiveness to others. In this part of the prayer, Jesus is forming us in another essential quality: he's forming us to be people who live, not by perfectionism or legalism, but by grace.

Finally, Jesus teaches us to ask God to lead us not into temptation. This is a prayer that we would keep our feet on your path, a prayer that we would follow God's ways. It's a humble prayer for our moral life: Lord, I am small and weak, help keep me from stumbling.

Put this all together and you have a prayer that roots itself deeply in God's love and in God's story. A prayer that is really intent on the Mary side of our faith. 'Father, my hope is in your love and my story is your kingdom. My hope is in you all day long.' And then when it turns to the Martha stuff, when it turns to our work and our doing, it's pretty modest about our capacities. It's a prayer whose eyes are not raised to high. 'Father, give me the strength to make it through today, let me be a person of grace, and keep my stumbling feet on your path.'

These are the fundamentals of daily prayer. They are not the end of daily prayer. We can pray for many more things than this prayer mentions; our Father loves to hear everything that's on the hearts of his children. But these are the fundamentals, and when we pray them the Lord forms our life, forms our souls, forms our hearts into their proper shape. When your prayer takes this shape, and you pray this prayer over the course of a lifetime the Holy Spirit plants your roots by a stream of living water and those roots are strong and deep.

I want to close with a story that I heard on Wednesday this week. I heard it at Al Jongsma's funeral. Al was a Christian Reformed Minister who served the church for more than 40 years, so he was a person who spent his whole life praying, and being formed by Jesus through prayer. He died last week at 90, and at the funeral one of his granddaughters told a story. Al had come to live with them during Covid and at that time, he wasn't doing well at all. He'd had a medical episode which left him almost completely non-verbal. He could barely string two words together and he needed a lot of help which the family was happy to provide. One night as the family sat around the dinner table, Al's son said, "Dad, do you want to pray?" And even though Al hadn't spoken a sentence for weeks, he lowered his head and he proceeded to pray a perfect, fluent prayer for the family.

I love that story. It shows you how even when you aren't aware of it, the Spirit is working on you shaping you and when that happens over a life time, the Spirit is giving you such deep roots! I love this story because it is such a great testimony for those grandkids who were around that table. I love this story because it is a testimony to all of us of the formative power of our prayer.

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