

“Money and Prayer”

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

July 28, 2019, Pentecost 7C

Luke 11: 1-13

We’re in the middle of our sermon series on “Money and Our Spirits.” And since the Lord’s Prayer is our Gospel reading, I’m going to talk about money and prayer.

I’d just like to do a quick survey. Could you raise your hand if you’ve ever worried about money or your financial situation or the financial situation of someone you love?

And now, could you raise your hand if you’ve ever prayed about it?

I think it is very human to worry about having enough to meet our material needs. And, as people of faith, we might feel bad about caring that much or worrying. We say things to ourselves like “money can’t buy what matters most—your health and good and loving relationships.”

But the truth is that money can have a big effect on both. Poverty is clearly linked to poor health outcomes—shorter and sicker lives. And there is nothing like financial difficulties in terms of the strain it puts on relationships. It’s a lot easier to be kind and patient and loving when you’re not all stressed about money.

Speaking personally, I have seen how money can make some hard situations easier. Money can buy excellent health care—even if it can’t buy health—and it can buy excellent special education—even if it can’t eliminate a learning disability.

So, I think that when we’re talking about money and prayer, it’s not about praying for a million dollars or a financial windfall. I think it’s about going to God with our troubles and the deep desires of our hearts.

I also think it’s complicated—and that we need some help with how to pray. We’re in the same boat as the disciples who asked Jesus to teach *them* how to pray.

If you look, there are a lot of prayers out there about money and financial stability. Probably the most famous is the Prayer of Jabez which comes from this part of 1 Chronicles: "And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, 'Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain.' So God granted him what he requested."

This is a very obscure biblical story but I think the attraction of this prayer must be that it got the results Jabez was looking for. We never hear anything more about Jabez after this.

As people who are trying to figure out what it means to follow Jesus today, I think there’s a good argument for focusing on what *Jesus* can teach us about prayer—especially when it comes to praying about money.

I remember the first time I started to think about the Lord's Prayer—and that was during Confirmation. It was the one part of Luther's Catechism that I was actually interested in. And if you're interested in seeing what it says, it's in the back of the hymnal on page 1163.

The Lord's Prayer has really grown on me over time—and I think that praying it *has* actually taught me how to pray. Instead of zoning out because I know it well, I find myself taking the words in and being struck by how well they encompass all that is in my heart and mind.

Theologian Douglas John Hall says that the Lord's Prayer is a deeply human prayer because it's speaking to God from a place of great need.

Which makes it the perfect prayer when you are in a place of being worried about money. "Give us this day, our daily bread." This is no polite request. It's brazen—maybe even rude—*unless* you see it as being driven by intense need.

Two things stand out—one is that this prayer for daily bread is plural—just like the whole of the Lord's Prayer. We're not praying for just ourselves. And we're not praying for a whole financial plan—we're praying for the needs of *this* day. When you're intensely worried—it really does help to focus on right now—on the present—on the needs of the present—and, "Give us this day, our daily bread," does just that.

This is a really different prayer than "enlarge my territory"—the prayer that Jabez prays. "Enlarge my territory" seems more like a long-term plan—like a long-term solution—like security—and for all those reasons it is appealing.

But Jesus teaches a really different kind of prayer.

And *this* prayer has stood the test of time.

The disciples saw Jesus praying off by himself. When he came back to them from praying, there must have been something different about him—something that made them say, "Show us how you do that!" They want what Jesus has—peace, strength, a sense of purpose—and they see it coming from his time in prayer.

This was another one of those weeks where things going on in my own life really connected to what I was working on with the sermon. We are *not* worrying about where the next meal is coming from in our family but we *have* had a long series of financial challenges. Some of the things are so hard to believe that it leaves me feeling that we are just extremely unlucky—what are the chances of all these things happening—and I've almost come to expect that if something can go wrong for us, it will.

But the timing of this challenge coincided with me being really steeped in the Lord's Prayer—and it honestly helped more than I expected.

My personal prayers are not very beautiful. They're along the lines of, "Come on, God, you've got to be kidding me! When are we going to catch a break?" I do have the sense of being able to go to God and that my struggles matter to God. But those kinds of prayers don't lift me out of my anguish and anxiety—I keep spinning in all those thoughts and feelings that are very self-focused and don't lead me anywhere.

But this week, I've been praying the Lord's Prayer—because of this sermon—and it has helped me so much that I'm bringing it into my daily prayer.

What the Lord's Prayer does is reorient us in two very important ways. The first is at the very beginning—"Our Father". Those words won't work for everyone and I encourage you to substitute any relationship that conveys deep love and care. In this prayer, we are addressing One who knows us and loves us and One who wants us to have what we need to become all that we can possibly be.

The second reorientation is toward the Reign of God—the Kingdom of God. "Your kingdom come." This Reign of God is the focus of this prayer, just as it was the focus of Jesus's teaching and preaching. When we pray, "Give us each day our daily bread," we are praying for everyone—including ourselves—to have what we need. We are praying that God's kingdom will be made real in and among us.

It's another version of the Prayer of Jabez, "Enlarge my territory." Enlarge the territory of my heart. Make the territory of my prayers, my concerns, my actions bigger.

I had that experience this week. In the midst of worrying about my own stuff, I read the ELCA Advocacy Alert talking about a bi-partisan Child Nutrition Bill. This is funding for school breakfasts, lunches, summer meals and WIC—something that literally provides daily bread to millions of kids who need it.

Learning about this didn't make me feel guilty about worrying about my own much less critical needs. It didn't make me feel like my concerns don't matter to God. Praying the Lord's Prayer gave me space in my heart and my life for the needs of others—it enlarged my territory.

And with this larger territory, I could see my own life more clearly. Yes, we have experienced an unusual number of bad financial breaks. But, the truth is that we have also experienced an unusual number of generous acts—a mind-boggling amount of generosity, to be honest.

Literally, nothing changed in terms of the financial situation I was worried about. And everything changed about my response to it. In praying the way that Jesus taught, these worries got put in their place. I was reoriented and given peace and perspective and purpose.

Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In verse 13 of our Gospel reading Jesus says: "...how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" The promise is that God gives us what we need.

Thanks be to God. Amen.