

“Teach Us to Pray” Marjory Bankson



Summer

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“Teach us to pray,” the disciples said, “the way John taught his disciples.” As Luke tells the story, Jesus then gave them the right words to use, and many Christians have prayed the Lord’s prayer on autopilot ever since. In the language of King James, it’s “Our Father, who art in heaven....”

Didn’t they already know how to pray? We know they’ve been praying to heal the sick, cast out demons and preach the nearness of God’s realm, so why this poignant new request – teach us to pray?

If we look at the whole sweep of Luke's narrative, we see in chapter 9 that Jesus has just turned his face toward Jerusalem, where he will meet certain death. In chapter 10, he sends out the 70 to test the welcome for his teaching. And now, in chapter 11, they see what will be required. Their request is a recognition of the fact that much **more will be asked of them**. In other words, they are saying, "How can we trust God like you do? How can we find the freedom that you have? Teach us to pray like that." We might be saying the same thing today.

Notice the language that Jesus gives them: "Give us this day, our daily bread. Forgive our sins, as we forgive those indebted to us." That's the language of now, of living in the present moment and not some far off future. Remember when he sent them out in pairs, saying that they should take no extra food or clothes? That they should stay where they are welcomed and eat what is put before them. This prayer is similar guidance: Trust what you need will be provided. Don't worry about the future. Don't let fear be your guide. Be grateful for this day as it is given.

That is a profoundly counter-cultural message! Particularly for us, at this time in history. After all, we live in a capitalist culture, where individualism and white supremacy ride roughshod over the common good, and TV advertising stokes our sense of needing more of everything: cheaper gas, safer schools, more medical care, higher pay, political power and so on. News and advertising tend to stoke our fears.

But our faith has another message: Give us this day, our daily bread. Teach us to recognize what is essential, what is enough. It might be called the "manna message" from Exodus. To us, it may sound more like a Buddhist teaching from Thich Nhat Han rather than Jesus, but if we listen closely to the words that Jesus gave his disciples, it's right there: Give us **this day**, our daily bread. Forgive us for the hurt we have inflicted and help us forgive those who have hurt us.

To sustain a different way of being in the world that we have inherited, with all its attendant addictions and distractions, we need each other – to listen and learn how to love one another – to help and be helped along the way – to practice being a body of Christ, here and now.

Two weeks ago, we had a Saturday gathering to identify the basic values that hold us together here at Seekers, to name the DNA of our community. It was an exercise in shared leadership and shared discernment, open to all, and trusting that those who came were called to this task.

From a list of many values collected from various sources at Seekers, we did several exercises to come up with five core values. Although five is an arbitrary number, and this list may not be the values that seem primary to you, I want to share them as a good-faith effort to describe the foundation for our life together. Each one is a school for prayer and living in the present moment. The values are: **call, commitment, the inward/outward journey, the open pulpit and loving one another as Jesus loved his disciples.**

#1. The authority and responsibility of call, both for individuals and groups. Assuming that every person has a call acknowledges the biblical record that God's call comes to all kinds of people, and is not just for professional clergy. But the Bible perpetuates the image that God speaks from outside of our ordinary human experience. At Seekers, we recognize that one's call may arise from our physical and emotional makeup, life experience and age, from pain as well as joy, and that call will take different forms over the span of one's life. To name one's call and have it confirmed in community gives one a clear guide for setting priorities for how we spend our time, energy and money. Accountability for taking action is another aspect of call. It's not enough just to identify one's call.

The call of a group has a similar function. What sets a

mission group apart from a conventional committee structure is its call, and taking time to articulate that call is an exercise in shared discernment. Once sounded, the call attracts members with a common purpose and it guides the collective work of the group. Passion for the group's call can over-ride individual likes and dislikes, and provide the basis for critical self-reflection and spiritual growth, so there is an inner and an outer dimension. And here's the scary part: If no-one is called, we don't do it. Call is about trusting the Holy One to give us this day, our daily bread.

#2. Commitment and intentional membership. Commitment is the key to belonging here. Nothing else is required. No statement of belief, no creed or credential gives you special standing. We are all called to be about the inner and outer work of ministry with others whom God has called. We don't get to choose who else might be there. This is a profoundly different path from the consumer values that say we can buy what we want and be only with people we like.

Because we live in an individualistic consumer society, encouraging commitment is a challenge. Although membership at Seekers is open to anyone who wants to engage in conscious spiritual growth, we do expect reliability and self-reflection in those who choose to stay.

Yearly recommitment (on the third Sunday of October) gives us flexibility, allowing people to move in and out of accountability partnerships, sharing groups, ministry teams, mission groups, and Stewards. Because we share the workload of being church together, we rely on these commitments to make this a welcoming space for all of us, no matter where you are on your spiritual path.

#3. The inward/outward journey. Many churches separate the inward journey of prayer and spiritual direction from the outward journey of social activism, but here at Seekers we claim Jesus' pattern of joining the two in mission groups as

described by Elizabeth O'Connor in her book, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*. The inward/outward journey brings the power of Spirit's guidance to our justice-seeking action in the world and, toward the end of our lives, can bring us a sense of peace and release rather than fear and regret. The inward-outward journey is a lifetime practice, not a single conversion experience.

Each mission group carries a piece of our community life, and it offers us a place to practice the inward/outward journey of learning to love people we may not even like much. Over time, the intimacy and process of spiritual reporting can provide a mirror for both the gifts and the grudges that we have, and develop new gifts in the process of doing the work that is ours to do.

#4. The open pulpit. Among my church-going friends, the open pulpit is always a surprise! "What about the quality of the preaching?" they ask, to which I usually reply, "Does seminary always produce good preachers?"

In many ways, the open pulpit is an act of radical trust in Wisdom's presence here. Most American Christians assume that a "real church" must have a full-time pastor who does most of the preaching. At Seekers, the open pulpit shines a light on our worship experience as spiritual formation for all of us. Preaching is a risk. Praying out loud is a risk. Asking for help is a risk – and we are all encouraged to take those risks, to trust the invisible net of love and respect here.

With an open pulpit, does that mean that anyone who walks in the door can preach? Or say whatever they want to say? Do we have any standards?

Thank goodness, we do have standards. You will find those guidelines on the Seekers' website. When Stewards affirmed the open pulpit at Seekers, they also affirmed the authority of Celebration Circle's call to oversee it. CC may encourage

people to preach, invite people from outside the community, and offer feedback for people who want to grow in that capacity. Learners & Teachers mission group also made a commitment to provide a steady stream of classes that would help all of us think more theologically. Continuing education is certainly part of the value that we associate with having an open pulpit and we want to equip everyone who might be called to share God's word for this community. That is our bread for the journey.

Another aspect of the open pulpit is one that you saw during Circle Time this morning: Julie Wan's presentation of Seekers on social media. We have needed that gift, and our prayers have been answered with her quiet skill and discerning eye. I'm so grateful for her initiative and her steady commitment.

#5. To love one another as Jesus loved his disciples. This value is clearly aspirational, but it includes our desire to be inclusive, diverse and justice-seeking – as Jesus was. We know that his radical welcome offended those who were concerned about purity rules and social class, and we keep working at dismantling the unconscious barriers that we have brought with us.

Loving one another is not just a nice ideal. It requires an embodied faith, and the kind of hands-on help which we practice here at Seekers. The other values, especially the open pulpit, actually rests on many smaller acts of working together. For instance, instead of hiring others to do things like touching-up the paint and replacing light-bulbs, we have Martha's Mob, an informal group that takes care of minor upkeep in the building – because doing that together takes us beyond the circle of a mission group life. Joining a hike or standing with the peace & justice vigil is another way. Doing things together is a way to love one another as Jesus did.

Another aspect of this embodied love is the way we handle domestic and international giving – a major piece of our

budget. To make a request for Seekers money, we ask first that the advocate be directly involved in that ministry. It must not simply be a "good cause." We want our money to follow our commitments, not the other way around. How to be good stewards of our common resources is another school for prayer and practice.

That is the list of core values at Seekers: call, commitment, inward/outward journey, the open pulpit and loving one another as Jesus did.

I will close with the prayer of commitment that we say every week, which is our version of the Lord's Prayer. The first part describes the inner journey:

*O Holy One, we come today to claim our relationship with you.
We pray for the commitment to grow together,
sharing the gifts you give us with others here and in the
wider world.
Forgive us for the hurt we have inflicted and help us forgive
those who have hurt us.*

The second part describes the outer journey:

*Give us strength and discipline to nurture our relationship
with you:
To care for every part of your creation;
To foster justice and be in solidarity with those in need;
To work to end all war, and violence, and discord;
And to respond joyfully when you call, freely giving
ourselves as you have shown the way.
We open our hearts to you and your creation in the name of
Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.*