

The People's Prayer
ST. Matthew 6:13

Were I to ask the rhetorical question, "*Do you pray?*" I hope that everyone would answer in the affirmative. And, if I asked another, "*Do you expect an answer?*" I would likewise wish for the same answer. After all, if we don't anticipate an answer, why pray?

Some people pray because that is what we have always done. Others pray because they are covering ALL of the ground. An acquaintance in high school wore a "Star of David" and a "cross" around his neck just to be sure, he said. The teaching of the Holy Scriptures is that we should be 'stunned' when our prayers are not answered!

The adage '*familiarity brings contempt*' might be laid at the feet of the Lord's Prayer. This may be so because we think we understand or know "*The People's Prayer,*" since we pray it each Sunday in worship, and many of us pray it daily.

Jesus taught this Prayer in the context of the sermon on the mount, and it was alarming to the people who first heard it. In the fifth chapter of St. Matthew Jesus' hits his teaching stride, having completely jumbled our idea of happiness and morality, like the spin cycle in our washing machines. Evidently, those people who are happy or blissful are those who are persecuted, grieving, and mostly stepped on.

We are not being moral when we do the "right thing," while over coming our longing to do the wrong thing. Rather, we are moral people when we do the "right thing" exactly because that is what we WANT to do.

Jesus died, without waiting until we reduced our sinfulness to an acceptable level. "*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly.*" To believe in a

theology where we have to do something to receive salvation is to miss it entirely.

The essential point is this: we are safe. Not safe if . . . not safe, as long as . . . not safe, provided . . . if we add anything at all we lose the Gospel of Salvation that is just Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!

Jesus prays for God to return, for God's name to be blessed, for God's will to be done, and for God's kingdom to come. He also asks for the muscle to do the commands that He has given earlier in the Sermon on the Mount. And, we are to forgive those who are in debt and not to be vengeful, whatever they have done to us.

If you ever entertained doubts about Jesus being a revolutionary, you simply need to glance at the end of his sermon, where St. Matthew adds, "*The crowds were astounded at his teaching, because he taught as one having authority, and not as their scribes* (7:28-29). Jesus is not just repeating tradition here, and most scandalizing of all, is his claim that he is God. His followers are sent into the world "*as sheep into the midst of wolves*" (10:16), to be witnesses in a violent and unforgiving world. Jesus is not blind: he knows that his call is not easy.

It is not surprising that Jesus teaches his disciples this prayer. They will need power to be faithful witnesses. Jesus knows that they will need communal strength, and he promises to build his church on the statement of faith made by St. Peter.

Jesus taught that after he ascended to the heavenly Father, where two or three were gathered he would be there praying with them. And, there was another requirement of the disciples: they must draw power from God, often in secret, in calm places, where they may focus on communication with God. If they did not do this their witness and ministry would be obstructed and impotent.

Of course, personal prayer was not new to them, since they were faithful Jews. The Old Testament is replete with references to devout people who prayed, but also a plethora of prayers: praise, petition, lamentation, blessings for children, and for strength and wisdom.

As we review this prayer of Jesus, where he shockingly refers to God as Father, and even as Father of us all, we perhaps grasp how those who heard this must have gasped! We know from later passages that those who listened to Jesus were God smacked by the power in which he taught. And now, he is calling God his Father, and, having called us to be “Followers of the Way,” we are his adopted children through faith.

This is why I sometimes refer to “The Lord’s Prayer” as “The People’s Prayer.” After all, we are the ones who are praying it, we are the ones who stand in constant need of God’s assistance. We can be assured the grace and power we need will be given to us. Each Sunday, when we pray this prayer together, I read it as printed in the bulletin. I do this so that I can concentrate on what I am praying because, for me, it can easily become rote rather than genuine prayer.

The essence of this prayer is: identifying ourselves as God’s children; asking God’s forgiveness; and asking for strength to be like Jesus and not give in to temptations. When we use the People’s Prayer as devotion we are in agreement with both the Sermon on the Mount and the theme of St. Matthew’s Gospel. This gospel gives us the church where we come to be a vital part of our testimony through prayer, singing, and hearing the word preached.

Then we are unleashed upon a world that needs the love of God shared by lovers of Jesus. Let us go and love one another. Alleluia. Amen.