The Hospitality of God

A Reading of Luke's Gospel

Revised Edition

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LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

that given directly to the Lord—attends to what the guest really wants and has to give.

Praying to a Hospitable God: 11:1-13

The commendation of Mary's single-minded attention to the Lord leads naturally into a request by the disciples that Jesus should teach them how to pray (11:1). Once again, they see him at prayer (v. 1a) and they know that John the Baptist had taught his disciples about prayer. So it is natural that they should look to Jesus for guidance in this matter. Jesus responds by giving them a form of words (the Lord's Prayer [11:2-4]). But this is not all—or even the main thing. Jesus goes on to give them a lengthy instruction on the attitude of confidence with which the disciples must approach God in prayer (vv. 5-13).

The Lord's Prayer: 11:2-4

Luke's gospel provides a more concise form of the Lord's Prayer than the version found in Matthew (6:9-13) that liturgical usage has rendered so familiar. The basic content, however, is the same. The additional elements in Matthew largely repeat, in alternative phrases, petitions common to both versions.

The prayer begins by invoking God as "Father" (v. 2). The disciples speak as members of the "household" or "family" of God into which they have been introduced by Jesus (cf. 8:19-21). They have heard Jesus thanking the "Lord of heaven and earth" as "Father" (10:21-22)[11] and have been assured of the blessedness they enjoy in the relationship with God that is now theirs (10:23-24). Now they are being taught to pray out of that relationship, calling God "Father" in their own turn.

The particular petitions come across in translation as wishes ("May . . . "). But in the original language of Jesus (Aramaic) they were probably far stronger—in effect telling God to bring about what they propose.

[11] Behind the simple Greek address *pater* would seem to lie the Aramaic *Abba*, the address to the male parent in the Jewish family—not quite as formal as "Father" and not so babyish as "Daddy," but lying somewhere between ("Dad"?). "*Abba*" seems to have been Jesus' characteristic way of addressing God; see Mark 14:36. In Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6 Paul refers to the Spirit's prompting believers to address God in this way. On the connection between this and the likely practice of Jesus, see further, Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 224, n. 30.

As such they follow a distinct logic: from a focus solely upon God in the first ("Bring it about that your name is sanctified"), to what God ought to achieve in the world ("Make your kingdom come"), to what the community needs from God—sustenance, forgiveness, rescue from overwhelming tribulation. The community that prays the prayer sees itself as a beachhead of the kingdom in the present world, reclaiming it for life and humanity. Since, like its Israelite ancestor of old, the community is on a journey, it looks to God for sustenance—that God will provide day by day the food needed for life (v. 3).[12] Likewise, because it is a community not yet arrived at the perfection of the kingdom, it is a community that needs continual forgiveness—both from God and mutually among its members (v. 4a). The sense is not that God waits to see whether humans forgive before offering forgiveness, but that human beings block the flow of God's forgiveness if they do not themselves lead forgiving lives. The final petition acknowledges that the world in which the community lives is very frequently a place of trial, persecution, and temptation.[13] The community prays that such troubles will not prove overwhelming, causing it to fall away from its high vocation (v. 4b).[14]

The community that prays the Lord's Prayer is, then, a community very conscious of its privileged closeness to God. But it prays the prayer in the world, as part of the world, on behalf of the world, to which it testifies the onset of the kingdom. It is praying for food, for reconciliation,

[12] Luke's version of this third petition suggests a continual (see the present imperative *didou*), day by day (*to kath'hēmeran*) provision, whereas Matthew (6:11) conveys more the sense of a once-for-all giving "today" (*dos . . . sēmeron*). The phrase "food needed for life" translates a Greek word, *epiousios*, notoriously difficult to interpret since it is not found in any Greek text independent of its appearance in both versions of the Lord's Prayer. It could mean "bread necessary for survival" (the interpretation I adopt here); "bread for today"; "bread for tomorrow." The latter two interpretations fit better with the Matthean than the Lukan form of the total phrase.

[13] In its original meaning on the lips of Jesus this petition probably had a more distinctive eschatological reference: praying for deliverance from the intensification of evil that was foreseen as destined to occur just before the final liberation; see further, Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 898–99.

[14] This admittedly is a somewhat adapted interpretation of the stark "do not bring us to the time of trial." The suggestion of God's direct agency in the original expression reflects a time when the distinction between God's absolute will (what God wants and effects) and God's permissive will (what God does not directly will but simply allows) was not formulated; see further, Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 906–7.

for deliverance from evil, not just for itself but for the entire human family, whose dignity and destiny as children of God it tries to model and proclaim. In short, it prays that the entire human race may return to the hospitable home of the Father.

The Friend at Midnight and Further Instruction on Prayer: 11:5-13

Having taught the disciples what to pray, in the parable of the friend at midnight (vv. 5-8) and its accompanying instruction (vv. 9-13), Jesus inculcates the attitude that must go with the words. The parable leaps right out of village life in Palestine in a wonderfully fresh way.[15] To grasp its meaning we have to appreciate that no less than three "friends" are involved. There is a central figure, whom Jesus addresses directly ("you") and makes the chief subject of the story. This person then has friends in two "directions," as it were: a friend who is a fellow villager (Friend A) and a friend from somewhere else who suddenly turns up as a guest (Friend B). The arrival of Friend B causes a crisis in hospitality: the main character ("you") has nothing to set before him. So, though it is midnight, "you" go to your fellow villager (Friend A), seeking three loaves of bread. The logic of the parable depends heavily on the sense of "shame" so powerful in the culture. In effect, the story puts this suggestion to its audience: Is it really conceivable that the man (Friend A) would respond in the way described (unwilling to get up and help because the door has been locked and the children are in bed, etc.)? Is it not certain that even if he won't get up for friendship's sake, he certainly will to avoid shame, the shame he would inevitably feel before the entire village the next day because he caused it to fail in hospitality?

As seen occasionally in Jesus' parables (see 16:1-8; 18:1-8), the character chiefly in focus is something of a rogue—someone forced to do the right thing against personal inclination or interest. The logic then works on an *a fortiori* basis. If this rogue will most certainly act and provide what is required, how much more certainly will the God of all goodness move to hear the petitions of those who approach in prayer.

That seems to have been the thrust of the parable on the lips of Jesus. But something of the original meaning seems to have slipped away in the course of its transmission. Or, rather, the sense of "shame" has been

[15] K. E. Bailey's discussion of the parable (*Poet and Peasant: A Literary-cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976], 119–33) brings this out well.

subsumed into a note of persistence. Now, the shame is not something that puts pressure directly upon the man who has gone to bed (Friend A). It has been transferred to the one ("you") who comes to him for assistance. What causes Friend A to get up is not personal shame but a shamelessly persistent knocking that he simply cannot ignore. So the parable, rather like that of the unjust judge and the widow (18:1-8), becomes an instruction on the need to persevere in prayer.[16]

I would argue, however, that despite the problems of language, the context in which Luke sets the parable—notably the triple instruction that follows (11:9-13)—preserves the original *a fortiori* logic. Why can one be certain that if one searches, one will find; if one asks, one will receive; if one knocks, the door will be opened (v. 10)? Because, if it is inconceivable that as human parents you would give your children a snake when they ask for a fish, or a scorpion when they ask for an egg; if, on the contrary, "evil" as you are (that is, as human beings in comparison with the goodness of God), you know how to give good and not evil things to your children, how *much more* will the Father of infinite goodness give good things (here, the gift of the Holy Spirit) to you!

The genius of the parable and of the sequence that draws from it is that it engages intense human feeling (the sense of shame; the sense of parental love and responsibility) and draws these directly into an attitude toward God. Jesus does not *tell* his hearers about God. He makes them *feel* something very deeply and then says, "That—multiplied a thousand and more times over—is how God feels about you! It is in the light of this knowledge that you should come before God in prayer."

[16] There is actually no word connoting the idea of "persistence" in the text. The Greek word expressing the reason that the friend gets up and attends to the request is *anaideia*, which literally means "shamelessness." The phrase then literally reads "because of his shamelessness . . ." The idea of "persistence" has to be imported from a sense of parallel with the parable of the unjust judge and the widow (18:1-8) and then the sense of "shamelessly persistent" knocking constructed. It seems more accurate to remain solely with the idea of "shame" (applicable to the householder rather than the one who knocks) and not import the notion of persistence. The problem, then, is to account for the negative form "shamelessness," when one would expect simply "shame." Also, the possessive pronoun "his" more naturally refers to the one who knocks. There are, then, serious problems attending both interpretations. Best discussion in Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 119–33.