

“The Center Will Hold”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Luke 11:1-13

Very disturbing events occurred over the past few weeks, causing great fear and anger and sadness. A truck plunged into a crowd of revelers in Nice as they celebrated France’s version of Independence Day, killing 84 people from around the world, including 10 children, and wounding scores of others. A failed coup attempt in Turkey ended more than 200 lives, and many more will be convicted of treason and executed. More recently, at least 80 people died from a bomb in Kabul bombing and 9 were shot to death in Munich at a shopping center.

Closer to home, as Election Day draws nearer, the political landscape becomes more toxic with cynicism, manipulation, and lies running rampant, threatening the integrity of our democracy. Race relations have reached a critical stage. African-American men continue to be shot regularly, often under very questionable circumstances, and police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge lost their lives in the line of duty at the hands of vigilantes.

In the midst of these crises, we feel threatened and helpless. It brings to mind the first stanza of William Butler Yeats’ poem, “The Second Coming”:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Frightened, our rage rises, like lava from a volcano, hardening into hatred and bigotry. We seek to stake out a claim of superiority to assuage our sense of powerlessness, or we

disengage from the world around us, preferring ignorance and apathy – a cheap substitute for real spiritual detachment. Either way, our faith shakes as mercy seems increasingly irrelevant, forgiveness impossible, and reconciliation a foolish dream. What can we possibly do to make a difference and bring about a change for the better?

The first followers of Jesus wondered the same thing. We tend to envy them, and rightly so. They could touch Jesus in the flesh. They could hug him! They witnessed his miracles, heard his wise teachings firsthand, and spent forty days with Jesus after his glorious Resurrection. Yet envy them as we might, they suffered hard times, too. Life as a first follower of Jesus involved delight and distress in equal measure.

In the first ten chapters of the Gospel of Luke alone, the disciples confronted demons on multiple occasions. They nearly drowned in a storm at sea until Jesus woke up and stopped it. After Jesus preached in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth, the congregation tried to kill him, and almost succeeded. Several times, the Pharisees and scribes harshly criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath and consorting with sinners, and their judgment mattered, because they possessed real power as the religious elite. Indeed, their opposition to Jesus led directly to his crucifixion.

How did the disciples cope with their stress and confusion? Well, they kept following Jesus, no matter what. Being faithful to him was their first, last, and only priority. They obeyed his instructions and observed him carefully, and one thing they noticed – in fact, Luke’s gospel emphasizes this heavily – was how Jesus frequently withdrew to pray in solitude. So they asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray.” After a lifetime of public prayer in the synagogue and daily private prayer, the disciples already knew something about how to pray. Yet they sensed that

Jesus could help them do it better, and he gave them 38 words – just 38 words – that we now call the Lord’s Prayer, meant to serve as a model for all prayers.

Much shorter and simpler than Matthew’s version, which we recite at every worship service, Luke gives a bare bones account, and this difference can help us escape the rut of routinely saying the Lord’s Prayer without really praying it, without paying attention to the meaning of the words we say. Because if we really mean what we say when we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we need to be aware that we’re asking for nothing less than a radical, revolutionary, and extremely counter-cultural change in our lives.

It starts with “Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.” The first 5 words starkly present one of the most challenging realities of being a Christian: the tension between God’s immanence and transcendence. On the one hand, God is our Father, and we, his children. He gives us access to His presence, the most precious of all the abundant blessings God provides. That’s called immanence. On the other hand, God is Holy, Almighty. He is set apart, a mystery beyond our full comprehension. That’s called transcendence.

So God loves us, and we can abide in that love, but we receive God’s grace only to the extent that we humbly accept God’s sovereignty through obedience to His divine Will. When we pray, “Father, hallowed be your name,” what we’re saying to God is, “I surrender control of my life over to you. I embrace your infinite superiority and gratefully accept the privilege of calling you Father. My preferences and priorities will conform to your preferences and priorities. I will stop pretending that I’m in charge of my own life. God, I belong to you.”

The next three words, “Your kingdom come,” take it even farther. This part of the prayer basically says, “I don’t just want my life to be ruled by your goodness and mercy. Instead, I want the whole world to come under the reign of your justice and compassion.” This eight word

plea for God to run our lives and transform our world with His coming Kingdom is a request with revolutionary consequences, and if we aren't ready for that, if we're unprepared to accept radical change, we might be better off not praying those 8 words. However, there's so much hope in those 8 words, inviting God to take control, because someday the plea will become reality, and the ugly, heartbreaking news that upsets us so will cease. I know that may sound naïve, but from the perspective of faith, it is the truth of God's promise to us.

Having established who we're talking with in the first 8 words, and who we are in relationship to God, the next 30 words deal with three specific things we need, which only God can provide. Give us what we need to survive: daily bread. Forgive us as we forgive others. Help us to avoid temptation: deliver from the time of trial. Here we humbly admit that we wholly depend on God for everything.

This contradicts many false myths in our culture, like that of the "self-made" man. Nobody makes themselves. Everyone was made by God, and we exist solely because God wills it. Our creativity, our industry, and the results that come from them originate from God alone. From the perspective of faith, this is a liberating claim, because it makes clear that our lives and our world do not depend solely on our own, limited efforts. And the work we do, the responsibility we assume, is made possible and supported by the might of our sovereign God, who loves us and provides for us in ways we can never fully fathom.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer with intention and fervor, we receive relief from the chaos within us and around us, because we make a statement of faith in God's sovereignty and power. We embrace a promise that someday the suffering of this present time will be redeemed and extinguished, and that in the meantime, God continues to work through us and others to bring His Kingdom to fruition on Earth, one act of mercy at a time.

It will not immediately eradicate the horrible events that happen so often. It will not instantaneously cure every ill or prevent every evil. The struggle will continue. However, the Lord's Prayer gives us hope, healing for the hurt, and the ability to take counsel of our faith rather than our fears. The Lord's Prayer, prayed earnestly, reveals that we are neither isolated nor helpless, and that even as "things fall apart," the center will hold, because the center is God. Amen.