

So as you may know, today we are beginning a sermon series that will run throughout the season of Lent on the Lord’s Prayer. We will be looking at different aspects of the prayer—what it meant then, what it means now, and whether we really know what we’re praying for each week when we say—or as we will do this morning, sing—those familiar words.

As such, I think that these words from author John Dominic Crossan are fitting ones to begin with:

“The Lord’s Prayer is Christianity’s greatest prayer. It is also Christianity’s strangest prayer. It is prayed by all Christians, but never mentions Christ. It is prayed in all churches, but it never mentions church. It is prayed on all Sundays, but it never mentions Sunday. It is called the “Lord’s Prayer,” but it never mentions “Lord” . . . .

It is prayed by Christians who focus on the next life in heaven or in hell, but it never mentions the next life, heaven, or hell. It is prayed by Christians who emphasize what it never mentions and also prayed by Christians who ignore what it does.”<sup>1</sup>

Hang on to Crossan’s words for a moment as we begin today with a story:

“Once upon a time there was a town that was built just beyond the bend of a large river. One day some of the children from the town were playing beside the river when they noticed three bodies floating in the water. They ran for help and the townsfolk quickly pulled the bodies out of the river.

One body was dead so they buried it. One was alive, but quite ill, so they put that person into the hospital. The third turned out to be a healthy child, who they then placed with a family who cared for [her] and who took [her] to school.

From that day on, every day a number of bodies came floating down the river, and every day, the good people of the town would pull them out and tend them—taking the sick to hospitals, placing the children with families, and burying those who were dead.

This went on for years; each day brought its quota of bodies, and the townsfolk not only came to expect a number of bodies each day but also worked at developing more elaborate systems for picking them out of the river and tending to them. Some of the townsfolk became quite generous in tending to these bodies and a few extraordinary ones even gave up their jobs so that they could tend to this concern full-time. And the town itself felt a certain healthy pride in its generosity.”<sup>2</sup>

I’m going to stop there. As we’ll see, this story has something to do with this greatest and strangest prayer and in particular today’s verse, as translated in Luke’s gospel: “Give us each day our daily bread.”

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<sup>1</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from: [http://www.baatc.org/uploads/1/0/5/1/10518066/justice\\_and\\_charity-the\\_river\\_parable\\_webinar-1.pdf](http://www.baatc.org/uploads/1/0/5/1/10518066/justice_and_charity-the_river_parable_webinar-1.pdf).

Now, as you might imagine, there have been a whole host of interpretations offered for what this petition means. And while we could make this a really long sermon and go through all of those—though I’m not sure Molli could stay awake for that—for me the meaning of this all hinges on the Greek word which we translate as “daily”—the adjective that describes the bread. The problem, however, is that the word’s “meaning is unknown since it occurs nowhere else in Greek literature independent of this text.”<sup>3</sup>

With that said, one source suggests that recently another use of this word was found in an ancient papyrus fragment. It was, believe it or not, a woman’s shopping list—“a note to remind her to buy supplies of a certain food for the coming day.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, Crossan argues that the “meaning is: enough for today, but also with assurance of the same for tomorrow.”<sup>5</sup> And Crossan goes on to explain why ensuring a daily supply of bread was such an urgent need in Jesus’ day.

You see, Herod Antipas—son of Herod the Great and Tetrarch of the districts of Galilee and Perea for forty-three years<sup>6</sup>—was following the example of his father, and “planned a new capital city for increased productivity.”<sup>7</sup> His plan was to move from the landlocked city of Sepphoris to the coastal community of a new city to be called Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee.

Why? Well, since “not much more could be done [in Sepphoris] to increase his tax base from peasants living at mainly subsistence levels . . . [his plan was] quite simply, to commercialize the Sea of Galilee . . . [probably instituting] taxes for every stage of fishing—for having a boat, for fishing with dragnets, maybe even for casting a net from shore.”<sup>8</sup> In short, Herod Antipas was looking to make more money from those who had very little to spare, which would, of course, make it harder for them to provide the basic necessities for their families.

Given this, you can see what such a petition might be getting at, right? “Give us the food we need for each day,” as the New Century Version of the Bible translates it. It’s a prayer—offered by people who weren’t sure where their next meal was coming from, or even if they were going to have a next meal—simply asking for the food they need to survive *today*.

Basically this petition was a way to say: Don’t worry about tomorrow, simply focus on today.

Now as far as I’m concerned no matter where we find ourselves this morning, that’s an important reminder to hear. For how easy is it for us to get overwhelmed by the immensity and complexity of life? How am I ever going to pay for my kids to go to college? How can I stay at this job for another ten years? How could I possibly undergo another round of chemotherapy? How will I continue on after my husband’s hospice journey ends?

Give us this day our daily bread, we pray. Help me focus on what I need for today, God, and let me take it—bread and all—one day at a time.

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<sup>3</sup> M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VIII*, Ed. Leander E. Keck, et al (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 204.

<sup>4</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, Matthew Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1975), 217.

<sup>5</sup> Crossan, 139.

<sup>6</sup> J.R.C. Cousland, “Herod Antipas,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, D-H, Volume 2*, Ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, et al (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 812.

<sup>7</sup> Crossan, 124.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 124 & 125.

But having said that, you may have noticed something else about today's petition: the prayer isn't give *me* this day *my* daily bread; it's give *us* this day *our* daily bread. This isn't an individual prayer, it's a communal one. And when we realize that, it unlocks a whole new level of meaning.

For when we look at this communally, we realize that it's about praying for all people to have the daily bread they need. And so, if we were to not only pray those words, but also seek to answer them, by acting as God's hands and feet on earth—as I believe the prayer calls us to—it might mean making sure that we are sharing food with those in need, serving those who are hungry.

And we're pretty good at that in the church. It's what we do in so many ways: we work at the soup kitchens at South Park Inn and Cornerstone, we offer food here to people through Foodshare, we donate items to the Tolland Food Pantry.

Those actions are good and important. You might say—to tie this in with where we began—that those actions are our way of caring for those in need who have washed up on our shore.

However, Crossan argues that there might be *even more* going on with this petition. For he says this is a prayer that “is [not] just about *food* . . . . [It's] . . . . about *just* food.”<sup>9</sup> It's not about food, it's about *just* food. Can you hear the difference?

Crossan argues that this is a petition for a just and equitable distribution of resources. And what that means can also be found in the story we began with today. Listen to how it ends:

“However, during all these years and despite all that generosity and effort [of the townspeople], nobody thought to go up the river, beyond that bend that hid from their sight what was above them, and find out why, daily, those bodies came floating down the river.”<sup>10</sup>

The story, as you can hear, is essentially an illustration of the difference between charity and justice. For charity is what the townspeople were doing. They were caring for the sick and dead who were washing up on their shore. And don't get me wrong, that is important work that needs to be done.

But they didn't take it to the next level. They didn't get to the root causes of the problem. They didn't take those few steps up the river, beyond the bend, to see what was happening to push all those people into the river. Why were they sick and dying and hungry?

That, my friends, is the work of justice. Today we might say that is the work of looking at the racial divisions between Tolland and Hartford or Tolland and Rockville and talking about why the homeless and hungry populations are so much higher there. That's the work of not just welcoming a refugee family in from Syria, but looking at what's happening in the world that is forcing them to flee their homeland, and doing what we can to remedy it.

That's the work of helping not only those with mental health challenges, but doing what we can to ensure that they have access to adequate resources and health care. That's the work of not just

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>10</sup> Taken from: [http://www.baatc.org/uploads/1/0/5/1/10518066/justice\\_and\\_charity-the\\_river\\_parable\\_webinar-1.pdf](http://www.baatc.org/uploads/1/0/5/1/10518066/justice_and_charity-the_river_parable_webinar-1.pdf).

recycling, but doing all that we can to make sure that we're not treading too heavily on this planet we call home.

You get the picture. It's hard and holy work, for sure, and if you're interested, it's work we'll soon be doing here with a newly forming team that will look at ways for us to do the work of justice in Tolland and beyond.

All of this is to say that when we pray these seven little words—"Give us each day our daily bread"—we are praying for an awful lot. It's a prayer for what we need to get us through the day—a reminder to take our lives one day at a time; it's a prayer that all may have bread enough to eat—a prayer to do the important work of charity; *and* it's a prayer for justice—to go up the river and see what's happening that's causing people in the world not to have enough to eat in the first place.

And so, I wonder: do we realize all that when we pray this prayer each week, do we really know what we're asking for? And do we actually believe that God can do great things with what we're praying? And are we just saying the words, or are we also seeking to help find and be the answers to those prayers?

For if we allow it, my friends, this simple petition can be life changing—for us and the world around us.

In other words, you could say that "Give us each day our daily bread" has given us an awful lot to chew on. And we're only at the first petition. There is so much more to come from this greatest and strangest of all prayers. Amen.

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