

HOMILY FOR THE 17TH SUNDAY OT, CYCLE C (2019)

One of the ways we learn is by imitating others.

Much of the first learning that babies experience is by imitating what they see their parents and others doing.

It is also true that we desire to learn things by watching others do something that interests us.

Whether it be playing a musical instrument, learning a craft or taking up an occupation, we often are inspired to pursue these activities because we see others doing them and desire to do them ourselves.

It is by observation of Jesus himself and by their recollection of something John the Baptist did with his disciples that there arises within the disciples the desire to learn to pray.

I don't think the disciples' request here is really about learning to do something they had never done before.

As devout Jews they would have prayed at least some of the psalms and would not have taken a meal with the family without having given thanks to God for the food they had received from his goodness.

It is more likely that they observe something unique about the way Jesus prayed and the way John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray.

In the context of Luke's story, the disciples' request is not unusual, because Luke tells us more often than any other evangelist that Jesus engages in prayer, and the disciples observe him doing so.

As devoted followers they are moved to imitate this behavior of Jesus and therefore ask him to teach them.

The first thing you may notice about the Lord's Prayer in Luke is that it is shorter than the one we will say at Mass today.

The one we do at Mass is Matthew's version.

While the prayer with which Jesus responds to the disciples' request may well be one that they were encouraged to recite, Jesus is also teaching them about the practice of prayer.

Notice that the prayer does not begin with what we want but is focused on God.

To begin the prayer with a desire that God's name be revered by people and that his coming Kingdom be established conditions the way a follower of Jesus is to pray.

Our first desire in prayer, before we ask anything for ourselves, is to be focused on God and God's plans.

Then what we ask for ourselves is conditioned by the desire we have expressed with regard to God.

In other words, whatever we request for ourselves is at the service of the honor of God and God's plan to bring about the Kingdom.

Let's see how this idea plays out in the petitions that follow.

Jesus teaches his disciples to ask for daily bread, forgiveness of sin and preservation from temptation to abandon our loyalty to God.

In its original sense the petition for daily bread probably referred to daily meals.

To request that God give us the food for daily sustenance means that we recognize that we owe our very existence to God.

Ultimately the food that sustains us comes from God, and we return thanks to God by using our strength and ability in the service of honoring his name and working with him to bring about his Kingdom.

But the early Christian community came to understand the petition for bread as relating to the Eucharistic bread, in view of Jesus' command at the Last Supper that his disciples share the bread-and-wine-become-his-body-and-blood as a perpetual memorial of him.

So by praying for daily bread, we not only pray for daily sustenance to carry out God's will in our lives, but also beseech God for the food that sustains us on the journey to eternal life—the Eucharist.

The petition on forgiveness is interestingly worded.

There is a deep human need to be forgiven, especially by God, for the wrong we do.

The God Jesus presents in his teaching in Luke's Gospel is indeed a God of mercy, as he will demonstrate a few chapters later when he speaks the parable of The Prodigal Son.

By our very act of requesting forgiveness, we acknowledge that we believe God to be a God of

mercy.

The gift of forgiveness is essential for us to be restored to activity in which we honor God's name and work for his Kingdom.

The damage done by sin to our relationship with God can impede our ability to promote the honor of God's name and our participation in the building of his Kingdom.

So a repair of our relationship needs to be done.

And God desires that this reparation be made, because God desires that we be in communion with him and working with him for the building of his Kingdom.

However, Jesus teaches us that there is a necessary condition we must enjoin upon ourselves if we are to request God's forgiveness.

We accept that we only have the right to request divine mercy if we are willing to extend mercy to others.

This is simply a matter of justice.

"Do not subject us to temptation."

The sense of the Greek verb "to subject" here is that of a definitive and completed action of God that is extended into the future.

We ask God to preserve us constantly from temptation, from what would lure us away from honoring God's name and devoting our time and energy to the building up of his Kingdom.

We make this petition because we know all too well how we can be distracted from our love for God and from our collaboration with him.

By making this petition we acknowledge before God our human weakness and the need for God's grace in the struggle with temptation.

The final lesson that Jesus imparts to his disciples on prayer in this episode is that prayer must be persistent.

On the one hand, we are not to get discouraged from praying because things don't happen immediately.

On the other hand, prayer is to be a regular and persistent activity of a disciple's life.

In a little while we will recite Matthew's version of the Lord's prayer, which includes the petition for daily bread, which, as I mentioned earlier includes the bread that sustains us for eternal life.

God will fulfill that petition shortly after that by feeding us with that very bread from the altar.

Should we not trust, then, that God will provide for us in all ways.