
Give us this day ...
Fairview United Church and Sydenham-Heritage United Church
Sept 6, 2020
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 12:13-21 and the Lord's Prayer

So - how did you do with your homework? Did anyone come up with any new wording for the Lord's Prayer that spoke more directly to your own life and your own feelings? If we were meeting in person today I would simply ask people for your ideas. But today, I will ask you to share your reflections over coffee after service. Or Contact me if you want to chat about this assignment.

As I mentioned last week, when I was reflecting on the Lord's Prayer myself, what I really got hung up on was the line "give us this day our daily bread". One of my hangups was what the word "bread" refers to - is it really just bread, or does it mean all food, or does the word imply all of the staples of life which might include employment with a living wage, safety, access to education, access to medical help, access to transportation, reasonable housing, reliable Internet, and being part of a community that cares about you? I was also trying to figure out the meaning of the word "give". Are we waiting for God to give us food as if God delivers pizza, or does "give" include giving us opportunities to work and feed ourselves? But my big hangup was around the word "us". When we say, "give us this day our daily bread", who is "us"? Was Jesus speaking to individuals, or a group? And who is "us" for us today?

In Matthew's version of the prayer, found in Matthew 6, Jesus tells his friends ... hang on, I'll read it. "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" [Matthew 6:5-6].

When Jesus said, "but whenever you pray", who is this "you"? Is it singular or plural? Does it refer to Jesus's friends as individual people, or as a group? In the phrase, "give us our daily bread", who is "us"? There is a lot of evidence that "you" meant

Jesus's friends as a group, and by extension, "us" meant the early Christian community. Originally, the "us" in "give us our daily bread" likely referred to a particular early Christian community. This idea is reinforced in Acts 4, where Luke speaks about how the Christian community is to share possessions. I quote, "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." [Acts 4: 32,34-35] The early Christian community was really into sharing! Can anyone here imagine selling your home in order to give money to another member of this church? We are fairly generous, but doesn't that sound extreme?

I'm pretty sure that when I was growing up, I thought it was "give us our daily bread" because all of us - in the church - were actually praying in our heads "give me my daily bread". Because I wanted my own share of the bread. I'm not alone in this. Here are some images labeled "give us this day our daily bread" that are about being grateful for the food that we ourselves will eat.

[slide: people eating - 3 slides]

These are gentle, pastoral images. But they depict gratitude for what we have. They are not really an invitations to share. In these pictures, "us" means whoever is already at the table.

Here's a quick quiz: How many of us sometimes pray the Lord's Prayer when you are all alone. When you are alone, do you say, "give me this day my daily bread"? Why not? I propose that even when we are were praying the Lord's Prayer alone we should still pray "give us this day our daily bread" because that is exactly what we want and hope for. Isn't it? I mean would you feel that God had answered your prayer for bread if you live in abundance but you know that your neighbour is starving? Don't we want the request for bread to be a request to provide bread to all people? Don't we want our God to share our own passion that everyone - including ourselves, our neighbours, and yes even our enemies - should have the basic needs of life met? "Give us this day our daily bread" includes me, but it is not only about me.

I spoke with someone recently who told me that they had given up believing in God because they could not reconcile in their minds the idea of a loving God with the vast amounts of social and other evils that human beings have to live with. There is nothing new in that conversation around what theologians call “theodicy”, which is how we understand the nature of God, and the nature of good and evil. Those conversations happen all the time. But this person said something that was novel to me - he mentioned the Lord’s Prayer and pointed out that the prayer is probably prayed billions of times every week and in this person’s mind, God simply does not deliver on the request for us to be given our daily bread. To his credit, this man fully understood that we are talking about OUR daily bread here, meaning feeding the entire population of the planet. And he is correct that the prayer is probably prayed billions of times every week, given that there are about 2.5 billion Christians and given the popularity of the prayer. And he is correct that about 2 billion people are malnourished¹ to the point of greatly reduced health and quality of life. And he is correct that the situation is an example of evil.

But I don’t think the man is right to blame God. Because globally we do have enough food. We have enough wealth. We have more than enough wealth. We just don’t share it. We (as a collective) have been given enough. One problem is that we simply do not prioritize global hunger. For example, if the US diverted 4% of it’s military budget, they could single-handedly solve world hunger. But an even larger problem is the hoarding of wealth. Some people - people with no imagination - can only imagine hoarding more than they need. Consider this graphic:

[slide: US wealth distribution as land]

This slide shows a massive wealth disparity within the US. We - meaning all people collectively - have a vast amount of total wealth. The only thing we seem to have more of is a lack of interest in sharing. This at least leads to interesting political cartoons:

[slide: about loss of jobs]

[slide: about demands for change]

When people ask God to give us this day our daily bread I sometimes want to just

¹ Here’s the breakdown: 1 billion are under-fed and 1 billion are over-fed, but the people in both groups are not getting adequate nutrition.

scream and point out that God has already handed out the bread, and we should be making the demand for bread - not to God who has already provided it - but to the people of this world that accumulate more wealth than they could ever use themselves who seem content to just hoard it. Hoarding wealth prevents many people from living proper lives while at the same time destroying the future for the hoarder themselves. And it is so discouraging that so many people with vast wealth lack any imagination for how to use it to help other people.

Before we go further, I assume we all know the difference between equality, equity, and reality. I'm pretty sure many of you like baseball, so perhaps these images will be helpful:

[slide: equality]

[slide: equity]

[slide: reality]

But political cartoons aside, what are we hoping for here anyway? What should wealth distribution even look like? And that's a serious question. How many people here think that wealth should be equally distributed between all people? How many people here think there should be some ability for people who work hard to have more wealth than others, but that the disparity between wealthy and poor should not be extreme. How many people here think that there should be no limits at all on disparity? It turns out that people have been surveyed on just that question:

[slide: desired disparity]

According to one survey, most people believe that a certain amount of wealth disparity makes sense. Some people do put in long hours working hard and some of us would rather not. This survey of North Americans suggests that people think the top 20% earners should have about 30% of the total wealth and the bottom 20% earners should have about 10%. That would be a disparity of a factor of 3. Does that seem fair to you? If you are not sure, I invite you to reflect on the fact that in the US today, the 3 people with the most wealth have in total the same amount of wealth as the poorest 50% of Americans combined. I tried to calculate the disparity factor, but my calculator exploded.

[slide: perceived disparity]

Here is the disparity that Americans think exists.

[slide: actual disparity]

And here is the actual disparity. These charts actually paint a fairly rosy picture. When you break down the population into 5 groups of 20% each, the disparity is not nearly as pronounced as when you consider the top 1%, or worse, the top 0.01%. Those disparities are astronomical.

The pointless hoarding of wealth is what drives our story in Luke. Quote, “And the rich man thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.’” Imagine that. The rich man had a problem because he had nowhere to store all his crops. The solution should have been obvious. Start giving away the excess, and then what remains would fit into his barns. The man could have said YES to “give us this day our daily bread” by simply sharing. Simple. Simple to say anyway.

I suppose I now need to tell you my own re-write of “give us this day our daily bread”. I suppose it would go something along these lines. “Given that we already have vast amounts of wealth, and food, give us this day a heart for sharing with all, including the lost and the least, our neighbour, our enemies. Help us to see our connection with all people”.

I believe that the call to “give us this day our daily bread” is not a request for mana from the sky. It is a plea that all people would share better. Not only share wealth, but share opportunities. We all deserve the right to work, for a living wage, in safe environments, and to be contributing members of society. Isn't that what we celebrate on Labour Day?

[slide: Jesus delivering pizza]

And now - to close - I want to leave you with a question to ponder. I realize this is now Sept 6, but I had to create this sermon in early August, and I have a tradition of giving my congregation something to think about over the summer. Here it is:

We sometimes think that “give us this day our daily bread” is about us sitting back, doing nothing, and waiting for God to give us food as if Jesus delivers pizza.

[slide: jesus delivers pizza]

Well, embrace that image for a moment, even if you don't agree with it. Imagine that we are just kicking back, doing nothing, watching TV, waiting for Jesus to ring the doorbell and give us pizza. Have you got that image in your mind? Good. Now here's the question. What might you do to give Jesus a tip?

Amen.