

July 24, 2016
10th Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 11:1-13
The Rev. Carenda Baker

“WHO IS JESUS?” reads the message – in big yellow letters on a black background – that is plastered on the side of a large utility building sitting along Rt. 81 travelling south. Underneath that question is a phone number: 855 – FOR –TRUTH.

We have before us an invitation to live into that question - “Who is Jesus?” That question is at the center of our identity as Christians. That question – “Who is Jesus?” is so important, that for the next several weeks, the Sunday sermons will focus on some aspect of who Jesus is. There are 2 related questions that we need to answer, along with “Who is Jesus? Those questions are: “Who is Jesus for me?”, and “Who is Jesus for Trinity parish?” Today’s gospel lesson offers a wonderful place from which to begin exploring this question - “Who is Jesus?”.

All four gospel writers show us a Jesus who is a passionate and devout Jewish man. He is a man especially passionate about two things: God and the kingdom of God. And because he is a gifted teacher, Jesus teaches about those things for which he has a passion. It is his passion for God that we see in today’s passage from Luke, a passion that is noticed by Jesus’ followers. Luke, probably more than any of the other gospel writers, emphasizes that Jesus was a man of prayer, committed to ever deepening intimacy with God and centering in God, his Abba, Father. Some scholars have described Jesus as a Jewish mystic, a mystic being one who seeks a direct spiritual experience of union with God. It’s very telling that the disciples notice this fact about Jesus – he goes off alone frequently to pray. Passionate people have a way of inspiring us to want to learn more about what is behind their passion, even drawing us more deeply into their passion. My hunch is that the disciples could see and feel this about Jesus, how much he loved God and always wanted to be in close communion with God. So, they ask Jesus to teach them to pray.

In the gospel reading then we have the “Lord’s Prayer”. It could even more aptly be called “the Disciples’ Prayer”. Jesus is definitely teaching the disciples some crucial things in this model prayer he gives them. For us it may be so overly familiar that we have forgotten the impact of what we are saying when we pray this prayer. It is not a sort of warm, cozy, “feel good” prayer. It is clear, and direct, and names the realities with which all humanity contends.

“Father, hallowed be your name.” Right away, there is in this prayer Jesus taught the intimacy of addressing God directly, acknowledging God as a holy and good Parent, whose name carries special meaning, and identifies God as One who is worthy of great reverence and respect. And then immediately comes reference to the kingdom – “Your kingdom come”. We know the disciples took a long time to begin to understand what Jesus was talking about when he spoke and taught about “the kingdom of God”. Jesus’ parables were something like object lessons to help them understand better what God was up to in the world. God has a plan for restoring this world, which unfolds slowly, subtly, subversively even. A plan where God re-shapes the world according to priorities very different than those currently in play. The plan the psalmist describes in Psalm 85 for today: “Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven.” God’s plan is not yet fully realized, but it is definitely present and unfolding in unseen ways to set the world right.

After establishing this intimate connection with God which begins the prayer, the priorities of God’s kingdom then get fleshed out more concretely. This is what God’s priorities for the world look like when lived out in the lives of human beings. Take note that these next three petitions are stated in the plural. Each uses the pronoun “us”. “Give us each day our daily bread.” This is about trusting God to give us what we need, to provide for us on a daily basis what we need for sustenance, which is different from what we might want. And the “us” is not just “me and mine” - family, clan, church, or nation. This is a plan for getting the entire world back into right relationship, into the pattern of life God originally intended. “Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us”. There is an assumption here that we are going to mess up. And there is an implication that we will be humble enough to admit this and turn to God readily and quickly to help get us back on track with God and neighbor. Eugene Peterson renders this line: “Keep us forgiven with you, and forgiving others.” This captures the truth that we are all ongoing works in progress, failing and falling, being restored and lifted up by God to try once again to live God’s way. And the accompanying expectation is that we will extend that same grace and mercy we have received to others – individual others and groups of others. “And do not bring us to the time of trial.” Peterson paraphrases it this way: “Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.” So we need God to guide us away from our personal capacity for sin, as well as steer us away from the effects of colluding with the collective sin of human systems and any forces that oppose God. “Rulers and authorities” they are called in the letter to the Colossians, and the lure of “principalities and powers” described in the letter to the Ephesians.

The fact that Christians have prayed this prayer in our corporate worship for centuries underlines just how central this model prayer is to help us live and grow into becoming more fully God's kingdom people. People who are shaped by God's kingdom values. In giving the disciples this prayer, Jesus teaches them a way of letting God shape them to become what they and we pray for – to be more deeply connected to and dependent on God our Creator and Provider, and more open to God's shaping us into the people God needs us to be in the world. People who Jesus described in his teaching as salt, leaven, light, and good fruit-bearers.

After giving them this model prayer, Jesus delves more deeply into the nature of the disciples' relationship with the God to whom they pray, the one Jesus calls "Father". Remember, Jesus is passionate about God. His advice is for the disciples to be persistent and explicit in their asking, shamelessly bold, in fact. Their boldness in asking will be a sign that they are trusting God to care and want to provide good things for them. And so, says Jesus, if you who are at best spotty parents, work to give your children good, not evil things, "how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

It would be good for us to spend some time in the coming week thinking about Jesus' passion for God and how that fueled his prayer life. Sometimes when life feels overwhelming, we use that phrase "how much more", but we use it differently than Jesus did. We do not always focus on the promise of good things God wants to give us. In fact, sometimes we leave God out of the frame entirely. In your family, have you said it or thought: "How much more of this strained relationship can I take? How much more of this caregiving can I take? How much more loss can I take?"

In our social and global context, how much more can we hear about instances of racism, terrorism, hatred, fear of the stranger and the other before we begin to believe *everything is bad* and *BAD* is the norm, rather than the peace and justice and grace and mercy of the kingdom of God?

Whenever we say "how much more?" from our places of hurt, pain and loss, can we hear God's response of "how much more I have to give you?"

Whenever we say "how much more?" from our places of abandonment and rejection, can we hear God say, "how much more do I promise to be with you?"

Whenever we cry "how much more?" from our places of disillusionment and disappointment, can we hear God say, "how much more do I love you?"

When we call out “how much more?”, Jesus would bid us remember that God can be trusted to answer in some way – increasing our strength, giving us courage, breathing into us renewed hope, granting us the peace and calm of holy presence, sustaining us in and through community, nourishing us in Word and Sacrament with God’s very life.

As disciples of Jesus our task is to be lifelong learners and apprentices of his way of life. This is what Episcopal Presiding Bishop Michael Curry means when he says we are part of “the Jesus movement”. Jesus’ way is the way of life grounded in prayer, passionate in seeking to know and love God more deeply and fully. It is the way of learning how to keep God in the frame and at the center of our lives, no matter what the circumstances are. It is the way of trusting that God’s kingdom is here, not yet fully realized, but coming. It is the way of learning and living out God’s kingdom values, because we *are already citizens* of that kingdom.

As a theme for our continuing exploration of who Jesus is, let’s return often to the words that began today’s epistle reading from Colossians (2:6):

“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” Amen.