

**Imaginative Prayer**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**7-28-2019**  
**Matthew: 6-14**

Alice Cooper famously sang, “School’s out for the summer!” And if I’m being 100% honest with you this morning, my head is nowhere near the schoolhouse!!! As I stand here, I have no interest in providing you with an intellectual, or historical, or even an accurate view of prayer, and more specifically Mathew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. I will however point you to a good read for when your headspace is ready, and the lawn’s not growing six inches a week: John Dominic Crossan’s *The Greatest Prayer* offers a thoughtful, smart, compelling, challenging perspective. Read it, and we’ll talk one-on-one sometime.

But like I said, it’s summer. And in these last few days that have felt more like September, my mind has been prone to wander, and wonder, and even dance a little, and imagine new possibilities.

So when I dove into today’s text, I didn’t approach it like a scholar, or a theologian, or a student. I approached it with the imagination of someone enjoying the fullness of summer.

I want to invite you to imagine the meaning of this prayer with me. And afterwards, in our talk-back, I imagine you might use other tools at your disposal – history, tradition, theology, reason, language, liturgy, politics – other tools to engage this prayer. And that’ll be fine, too. I’ll welcome it.

Here goes:

I know that the first-century world was built on patronage. You had to give, and to speak, and to offer praise, and to even apologize, very publicly, to people in power, and in return, you got some, or all, or sometimes none of what you needed. The world, then, as it is now, was all about making resources scarce, and letting the powerful use the leverage of scarcity to pull the levers of justice.

To my recollection, Jesus proclaimed a different kind of world or system. God has the power of a patron – that is to affect good, to be a protector, to provide for our needs. But God doesn’t act like a patron, because God doesn’t hoard resources, nor does God dole out affection based a merit system, nor does God require affection be documented and recorded for the public record.

In today’s passage Jesus is telling the disciples, and you and me, how we ought to give, pray, and forgive one another. I don’t think this is a shaming of hypocrites for their PDA (public displays of affection). Instead, I think it’s a suggestion that intimate, private actions bear fruit in our relationship with God. More specifically, I think Jesus is asking us to imagine our relationship with God in the same manner we imagine our most intimate and personal relationships. And then to vocalize our feelings.

And so I imagine the people closest to me, particularly my children and my wife. And while I do think it’s important to publicly acknowledge my love for them, and to shower them with gifts, neither of these actions are nearly as transformative as private ones. There’s gonna be flamingos in the yard on birthdays that end in zero, and we’re gonna eat some cake, too, and the whole world’s gonna see. But the real fruit, the real love, the real connection is born out daily, in the private corners of our home

when the mic is turned off, and the day's busy-ness has subsided, and we share three simple words: I. Love. You.

What if we prayed or spoke to God with the same affection, the same intimacy, the same energy as we spoke to those whom we love the most? Jesus picks a name, "Abba, or Father." I imagine him saying Daddy, or Deedy, if he's from down east. But pick one for yourself. Who's comfortable, or familiar, or safe for you? Dear Mother, or Sister, or Spirit, or Source, or Mama Bear, or Coach, or Friend, or Creator, or Artist, or Partner. Pick one. Pick one you can see. Pick one who makes you feel good. Pick one who offers you value and worth.

And now imagine how that Daddy, or Momma, or Friend, or Support System gives you worth. And understand that this support is not offered in the way of Caesar with public conditions, but rather out of love, real love. And pray that such a name is to be heard, and made sacred, real, and connected.

Jesus says, "Now imagine this world we inhabit, with its rulers who offer too many limitations. Pray for your Daddy's world, for your Mamma's world, for your Great Aunt Tina's world, because that world, the heaven that is God's presence, that world ain't like this one. That world is bursting into the present, and it's built on love. And it's built on equity. And It's built on trust. And it's a world that you fit into. So ask for it. Ask for that world to be made a reality, right now. And ask God to help make you an agent in that transformation."

And ***give us this day our daily bread***. I don't know what it's like to not have bread. So I have to imagine something else. God give me that thing that I need to thrive, that thing I need to be made whole. And give it to my neighbors, too. But more importantly, help me to see, and to acknowledge that you are the source of my bread, of my wholeness, of my enough-ness.

And ***forgive us our debts, or our trespasses, or our sins. And help us to forgive others in return***. I don't care which word you use. I owe plenty of money, my mailbox tells me so every day. And I'm curious, so I've hopped a fence or two. And I'm no saint, so I've wounded others, and fallen short of the glory of God. I think Jesus says, "acknowledge your humanity." And I try to imagine those special instances where I've hurt someone or been hurt by someone. And we've found mutual forgiveness. And we've moved on to stronger, more authentic relationships. And we aren't afraid of repeating the process. When I imagine such a thing, I imagine a circle full of people much greater than the one it's true for now. And I long for such a world.

***Don't test me. Don't put me through a trial***. I imagine a Google Review. The world keeps giving me three stars out of five, and the only way I can bump up that rating is to respond to their comments. And even my Uber driver rates my performance. All I did was sit there?!? Was I too friendly, too quiet, is the 90s on 9 not a good station choice? My income, and my cholesterol score, and my home value, and how much I paid for my electric bill last month, and SO many other ridiculous societal markers are the basis of my worth, the tests of my righteousness, and the authenticity of my patronage.

And they create an evil that distracts us from the pressing issues of our day: the world needs bread, and the world needs justice, and the world needs peace, and the world needs God. The God that shapes the world to come, and that is becoming, is not like the rulers we know now. Our God transcends politics, transcends technology, transcends patronage, transcends all that we can imagine.

Our God is a source of goodness. Our God is a source of sustenance, our bread, actually and metaphorically. Our God provides the foundation for us to live in loving, healing, equitable relationships. Our God is bringing about the world we want right now.

When I pray this ancient prayer, this is the kind of stuff I imagine.

I realize that some of this language is stilled. I realize that some of you may have said this prayer so many times it's become rote, because the words and rhythms are too familiar. I realize that father can be a painful metaphor for people who didn't get to experience fatherhood in a positive way. I realize that bread, in this age of too many processed ingredients doesn't offer the expansive sense of inclusion that it once did. I realize that kingdoms bring with them a bevy of troublesome inequities, especially in the age of democratic republics. And I even realize that this is most likely not a verbatim prayer from the mouth of Jesus.

If some, or any of these things are a stumbling block for you, and an obstacle too big to overcome, I think that's fine. Don't say this prayer. Don't make it a routine. Don't force it to work for you.

But maybe, maybe, even if this passage is hard for you, there's value in considering it a tool of imagination. I think long ago, that Jesus spoke about God in the most intimate of ways. And he tried to express how he believed God was shaping the world: as a close, familiar, loving, powerful, source of provisions and justice, who is always working to make the present day a reflection of God's image. And Matthew's community did their best to mold a prayer that reflected such a belief. It's by no means perfect, but I think it serves its purpose well. This prayer is a muse, inspiring us to imagine God's investment in us, and in the world, and to express that investment in a concise and meaningful way.

Think about it. Caesar walks past, and the trumpets blow, and the proclamations are read, and the ring is kissed, and the favors are doled out.

What does God expect? A 58-word prayer, with only one three-syllable word. And spoken in the privacy of your own home. Well if that doesn't send shockwaves through patronage, I'm not sure what does!

And how grateful I am, that these words have found their way to us. May their spirit, and the hope they proclaim, be made manifest now, and in all the days to come. Amen.