

The Lord's Prayer
Wednesday, March 10, 2010
Psalm 67:1-7; Matthew 6:1-15; Large Catechism

When I preached on the Ten Commandments a couple of weeks ago, I had you imagine you were training a dog in order to help you understand the purpose of the Commandments a bit better. This week as we reflect on the Lord's Prayer, I want you to imagine that you are a Chinese peasant of the 10th Century. Flexibility is good for the brain.

You live in a southern province of China, far from the northern imperial city of Beijing. You're separated from the Emperor's palace by many miles; wide rivers; high mountains; bands of thieves and thugs; and a language that is as different from your dialect as English is from Flemish. Your world is bounded by rice paddies and water buffalo; cycles of flood and drought; poverty, disease, and eternal hard work. What do you know of courtly ways, palace intrigues, the art of warfare, or the mysteries of philosophy? The Emperor may as well live on the moon, so far removed is he from your existence. All you know of him is what comes occasionally to your village from Beijing in the form of edicts and proclamations, demands for taxes, and conscription in the imperial army or in the corps of laborers building palaces and roads.

That's the way things go - until the day that a *new* proclamation arrives. "The Emperor wishes for all his loyal subjects to speak freely

with him on any matter that concerns them. He will grant to any who ask, the help and recourse, blessing and gift they beseech of him. He will send messengers and heralds into every village to receive the petitions, and to return with answers and aid."

You don't know whether to be overjoyed - or terrified! Granted, there are concerns that only an Emperor has the power and authority to address; but you?! Speak to a representative of the gods on earth?! You get tongue-tied talking to the village elders about a stray pig!

You start memorizing flowery phrases you think will impress the Emperor and his representative; you repeat them over and over in your mind so you get them right. You swing back and forth between giddy pride that you (*you!!!*) will have the Emperor's ear, and terrified discouragement. "Who am I that he would listen to me," you ask yourself. "There are others so much more deserving of his ear; they have greater needs; or they are wiser and more pious than am I."

You work yourself into a frenzy of dread and anticipation; finally the day arrives when the Emperor's messenger arrives in your village. To your surprise, he is dressed in the simple garb of a working man, and he speaks your dialect fluently. Even more astonishingly, he wears a signet ring which identifies him as no ordinary messenger or herald, but as the Emperor's own son. Before you can wrap your mind around

that, though, he sits down in the village square and beckons everyone, young and old, lowly and great, even women and children, to gather round and listen as he instructs you.

"This is no empty promise or jest," he begins. "My Father is most serious in his command that you share your concerns with him. You will dishonor him if you do not take this as seriously as he does and refuse to speak to him about all of your cares and ask for the aid you require."

"My Father does not need you to use fancy, flowery words," he goes on - and you swear he glances your way with a faint smile. "Simple words are best. He may live in a heavenly palace but he understands down-to-earth words."

You breathe a tiny sigh of relief; it was difficult to remember those elegant petitions! But now there's nothing left in your storehouse of words. How awkward and uncouth you feel; how low and undeserving of this great Emperor's attention!

"My Father does not regard your petitions on account of the person offering them, but on account of his word and the obedience you accord it," the Emperor's son continues. "If he did not intend to answer you, he would not have ordered you to speak, nor backed it up with such a strict command. If you do not believe his promise, you

should know that you anger my Father and grossly dishonor him. In fact you accuse him of lying!"

There are gasps from the crowd. Dishonor the Emperor? Accuse him of lying? Never! "But how can we honor him most fittingly," one of the elders asks. "What shall we ask of him? What ought we say - and what words shall we use to do the Emperor honor?"

"I will teach you myself," the young man says firmly. Use my words as they are - or use them as a framework for your own. My Father is deeply concerned about your needs. Do not ever doubt that these words please him and will assuredly be heard; they are far superior to all others you might devise. With these words you need never wonder whether you have pleased him; there are no nobler words found on earth. Do not trade the words I will teach you for all the riches in the world."

Everyone in the village leans forward, intent on capturing the magical words that might so capture the Emperor's ear.

"He gives you the right to speak to him as freely as I, his only son and heir, speak to him. So I will stand before him with you, and together we shall call him our Father. And because *you* now call him Father, it is your duty in every way to behave as good children so that he may receive from you not shame, but honor and praise."

There are more gasps. Call the Emperor Father? Would not the heavens rain down lightning and hail for such boldness? Would not the earth swallow you up for such daring? But you understand obedience; you understand that a child must give honor to a parent by willingly obeying every command. You try out the phrase in a whisper. "Most noble, exalted..." No. Try again. "Father. *Our* Father. Dear Father...."

"Very good!" The Emperor's son beams with pleasure at your fumbling efforts. "For if you speak to him as your Father, you will dare to be bold. He desires that you ask many and great things of him! He is prepared to give you great and lavish gifts! Only do not insult him by asking only for a dish of beggar's broth! You would rightly be considered a rogue or scoundrel, for thus mocking his imperial majesty! You would show yourselves unworthy to come into his presence! Do not ask for mere crumbs, but for an eternal and priceless treasure - for everything that the Emperor himself possesses! Pray that you should receive his Kingdom, for his delight and his will is to share it with you!"

You hear your neighbor half-snort, half laugh. "Preposterous!" he whispers to you. "Ask for the Kingdom? As well ask for the skies to rain gold and the rivers to run with rubies and pearls. Even if the Emperor *could*, what chance is there he *would*?"

"I heard you, my friend," the Emperor's son calls out. "But my Father would not dishonor *himself* by promising what he cannot, or will not, give. And any way," he adds with a laugh, "he wants you to ask with complete confidence. If you can with complete assurance ask for the whole Kingdom of China; for entry into the Forbidden Palace - nay, for heaven itself - then think how much more confidently you can ask for, and expect, that he will satisfy your belly!"

Everyone chuckles at the young man's quick retort. But it gets you thinking. *If I promise my little son that I will love him forever, no matter what, then doesn't he have the confidence to ask me for some little thing? But how can I apply such a lowly thought to how the Emperor should behave towards me?*

The neighbor who had scoffed raises his hand. "Even if we were to receive the great and noble gifts that your honorable father promises," he says, "how do we protect ourselves from thieves and evildoers who already seek to take from us the little we have?"

Others nod and murmur agreement. The Emperor's son raises his hand, and you all become silent. "In a good government there is need not only for good builders and rulers, but also for defenders, protectors, and vigilant guardians," he says. "So here also; it is right that you beseech my Father to cause his will to be done. If by your own

strength you try to hold these treasures fast, you will suffer an astonishing number of attacks and assaults. You are right to ask the Emperor for the help only he can provide so that you enjoy in safety everything that it is his will to give you."

"Indeed," he adds, clearly warming to the topic, "the greatest need of all is to pray for the civil authorities to do the will of the Emperor, for it is chiefly through them that you are provided with daily bread and all the comforts of this life. You cannot retain any of them or enjoy them in security and happiness were he not to give you a stable, peaceful government."

The Emperor's son pauses as a thought occurs to him. "It would therefore be fitting if the coat of arms of every upright elder and ruler in the land were emblazoned with a loaf of bread, or if a loaf of bread were stamped on coins, in order to remind all of you that it is through the elders' office that you enjoy protection and peace; and that without them you could neither eat nor preserve the precious gift of bread. Therefore, not only the Emperor but also all of your rulers are worthy of honor; you are to render to them what you should and what you are able, as to those through whom you enjoy all your possessions in peace and quietness. Moreover, I urge you to bring your elders in remembrance to my Father, so that that through them he may bestow on you still more blessings and good things."

The whole crowd is buzzing now. This young man truly is the son of the divine Emperor - such wisdom from his mouth! Everyone is thinking of the many needs they have - food, shelter, protection from enemies. It had never occurred to some of them to pray for the village elders, nor to bring their elder's needs before the Emperor. "We did not think beyond our own tables and bellies," someone admits. "Truly the Emperor is wise to remind us that our own bellies are not filled solely through our own efforts."

The town blacksmith edges forward with a worried look on his face. "Please do not take my words amiss," he says humbly, "but how can I come before your most honorable and noble Father with any request whatsoever? I am under orders to provide the imperial army with swords and helmets; but I cannot meet the need. I have a terrible debt to the Emperor and cannot repay it. I cannot bring the needs of my belly, or even of my children, to one I have offended so greatly."

The Emperor's son stands, walks to the trembling blacksmith, and touches his shoulder. "My Father does not wish to regard your debts and punish you as you deserve; but to deal graciously with you, to grant you a joyful and cheerful conscience so that you may stand before him in supplication. For where the heart cannot generate such confidence, it will never dare to ask. But such a confident and joyful heart can never come except when you know that your debts are forgiven."

He turns and addresses the whole crowd. "Therefore you should also forgive one another whatever debts - of money or labor, respect or duty - that are owed you. If you do not forgive, do not think that the Emperor will forgive you. But *if* you forgive, you have the comfort and assurance that you are forgiven in the heavenly palace itself—not on account of your forgiving (for he does it altogether freely, out of pure grace, because he has promised it) but instead because he has set this up for your strengthening and assurance."

You notice that the whole crowd is silent, as if trying to work this teaching out in their minds. How different - and difficult - it is! "We have very long memories," you say. "We have long memories of debts and grievances. Life is not fair; and it is very hard. This is a frightening thought - to simply let go of what is owed us and what we need to live."

The Emperor's son nods sympathetically. "This requires trust, so I say again: *whatever the Emperor claims against you, he will set aside.* Then you may come to him in confidence to ask for aid. And if you are then permitted to ask for bread for your belly, you may also ask him for aid as you set aside the claims you have against your neighbor."

"You see that my Father is willing - and able! - to respond to the deepest and highest needs you may bring to him. But how tempted you all are! Do not shake your heads; I see it in your faces - how very

tempted you are to disbelieve his promises! It is as if some devil is causing you to scorn and despise both the Word and the works of my Father, to draw you into unbelief, false security, and stubbornness, or, on the contrary, to drive you into despair! These are snares and nets; indeed, they are 'flaming darts' that are venomously shot into your hearts, not by flesh and blood but by the devil!"

"So I will tell you one more thing to ask of my Father! Ask him for the strength to resist this and every temptation! He cannot cause you to escape temptation; only in death are you safe from it! But he can give you courage to resist saying 'yes' to it. Then you will see that all temptations must finally cease disturbing you and admit defeat."

"You say that Your Father is more powerful the gods we pray to!" someone cries. "You say that he will give us what our hearts and minds need, not just our bodies and bellies! Why, maybe we should go all the way, and ask him to help us get rid of all our misfortune! Look at all the evil that befalls us. Good sir, my apologies, but at times it seems we live in the devil's own kingdom, not the Emperor's realm at all! See what poverty, disgrace, death, tragic misery and heartache we endure - and not just us but undoubtedly every person on this earth."

Once again, there are gasps from the crowd. The effrontery of this rascal, to say out loud, and bluntly, what everyone is thinking!

Surely this, at least, the Emperor will not forgive. Surely this will imperil all the promises and assurances his son had given!

But to your astonishment, the Emperor's son jumps to his feet again and claps the man heartily on the back. "How wise you are to see what must be the capstone and climax of all the requests you lay at my Father's feet!" he cries. "He *wants* you to ask him for everything that attacks even your bodily welfare, so that you seek and expect help from no one but him! In the end he will preserve you from sin and disgrace and from everything else that harms or injures you. Do not doubt that your prayer is surely heard and will be answered.

"Your last word to my Father, therefore, should not be a question or a plea. It must be a hearty 'YES' to all that he has promised. For you should never come to him as one who asks as if any answer would be a matter of luck. I want you to know that my Father does not lie - he has promised to grant it."

With that, the young man bows politely and makes as if to leave. "No - please, stay," you blurt out. "Teach us more. Tell us about your Father, the one we thought was so distant and forbidding, the Emperor in a palace of silk and gold and jade - and yet you say he wants us to call him Father. Why, next you will surely tell us that he has changed his will so that we are his heirs along with you!" You clap your hand over

your mouth, embarrassed at your boldness. But he smiles, and says, "Do not worry. I shall stay and tell you everything you need to know. Let us sit down over dinner and talk some more."

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, almost every word you just heard is taken from Holy Scripture, or from Martin Luther's Large Catechism. As a part time Chinese peasant, you should have been astonished that the emperor would speak thus to you - or you to him. As a full-time Christian, you should be equally amazed and astonished because this is how Jesus commands and urges us to think about - and speak to - his heavenly Father.

May he grant you the gifts of astonishment, gratitude, and unshakable confidence in the promises made to us in Holy Scripture, and most especially in this prayer, in which we are bold to say, "Our Father. Our dearest, most precious Father." Amen.