Sunday, March 13, 1983

"GOD AND OUR DAILY NEEDS"

(Continuing the series on the Lord's Prayer)

Matthew 6:25-34

Jesus' understanding of prayer was one of direct and intimate communion with God, and he understood God as the essence of all life, both visible and invisible, tangible and intangible. We live in a universe where God's presence is everywhere, in the physical as well as in the spiritual. The entire creation is alive and dynamic. God is both within us and around us, far from us and near to us.

We, however, do not always stay in tune to receive the guidance and strength from God which is always available and which we need. Our minds are constantly filled with other things, and some of them can actually block our giving attention to God -- things such as fear, worry, greed, resentment, and guilt.

As we have been seeing in this sermon series, the "Lord's Prayer" teaches us good and wholesome attitudes which help us focus our minds on God. The words of the prayer are there to guide our thoughts and our mental attitude.

The Lord's Prayer, as I have noted before, is divided into seven petitions. The first three are adoration. They concern God's nature (Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name); God's Kingdom (thy kingdom come); and God's will (Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven).

The next four petitions deal with our needs: first, our need for daily bread and all the basic necessities of life; second, our need for forgiveness; third, our need for defense against the onset of temptation; and fourth, our deliverance from evil.

This morning we are going to look at the first of these four petitions which concern our daily needs -- the phrase, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Note first that the Lord's Prayer is about the spiritual

and the physical side of life. It is a total prayer which reminds us of the vastness of God's kingdom and the daily needs of individuals. "Give us this day, our daily bread."

The Christian religion with its Jewish roots has always taken the physical aspects of life seriously, as well as the spiritual. In fact, there can be no separation of the physical and the spiritual. It is one world, one creation, and modern physics underscores this. All matter is energy. The physical and the spiritual are simply two aspects of one creation.

Thus Jesus taught that feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting and caring for the sick, helping the poor and needy -- these so-called physical acts are as important as caring for their spiritual welfare. They are one and the same; that is, one cannot be done without also doing the other.

So in the New Testament we see Jesus dealing with what we sometimes think of as the trivialities of human existence. He occupies himself with the grief of a mother who has lost her son, the predicament of a paralytic, the weariness of his disciples, and he does not fail to notice that the people who followed him into the wilderness are hungry. He is even concerned about the wine at a wedding, and he has special concern for the so-called "little people": the lepers, the lame, and the mentally ill -- the outcasts of society. He is concerned about the physical aspects of living, as well as the spiritual.

Notice especially that his prayer asks us to say, "Give us this day our daily bread." We do not say, "Give me this day my daily bread."

That's why from the beginning, Christian churches have been concerned about widows and orphans, and have begun hospitals, nursing homes, orphanages, city missions, so that those who are in special need can get daily bread. That's why missionaries as part of their message and task have not just spoken the words of the gospel, but also have taught new and efficient farming methods, soil conservation, and

have helped to build adequate sanitation facilities and hospitals so that the health and well being of people in a community are protected. It is not enough to be concerned only about so-called spiritual things.

That's why today in churches throughout this country, including this one, we promote the "One Great Hour of Sharing" offering. This offering helps to provide the daily necessities for people who need them. If you read the sheet which came in the mail with your special offering envelope, you know that $20 makes it possible for a community in Africa to care for the needs of a child for one month. $50 will provide ten blankets for families after floods have ravaged their lands. $75 will make it possible for us to deliver a quarter ton of food to persons suffering from hunger. $200 added to funds supplied by a village will make it possible to dig a well for pure drinking water.

Here is one very specific way in which we as Christians live out what we pray in this fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." The "us" is anyone anywhere who is in need of the basic necessities of life.

In the society in which Jesus lived, bread was considered the basic stuff of life. In his time, each household didn't bake a supply of bread which would last for several days. Instead they baked their bread every day for that day's needs alone. And not only did they bake enough for their own family's needs, but they also baked extra bread for the needs of travelers who might happen to stop, seeking food for their journey. It was "our" daily bread, not "my" daily bread.

So we have seen first of all that in the Lord's Prayer "daily bread" stands for all the physical necessities of life. God is concerned about all aspects of our living. A Beethoven symphony sounds quite different if we have to listen to it while we are shivering with cold or while we are shaking from hunger. Material necessities -- daily food, shelter, enough clothing -- all play an important part in our lives. If an individual

has to constantly be struggling to find the basic necessities of life, then all of life looks different. Real abject poverty strips a human being of dignity.

However, having enough food to eat, enough clothes to wear, adequate shelter, having all of these and more does not solve all our problems. If all persons everywhere were given financial security, would they automatically be internally secure? No, they would then not fear starvation, but absence of fear is no indication of courage. Many people who have enough then begin to worry excessively that they are going to lose what they have. So they become over-anxious about life. They are not sure when enough is enough.

That's what Jesus was talking about in the part of the Sermon on the Mount we read as our scripture reading for this morning. "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" These words do not contradict the petition of the Lord's Prayer -- "Give us this day our daily bread." Jesus rather is saying in the Sermon on the Mount that too many of us who already have our daily bread worry excessively about such things. And then we mistakenly go on to think that if we only had more, we would be happy.

This is the other side of the story. Simply satisfying human physical hunger is never enough. Thus our missionaries have to do more than help feed the hungry with food for their stomachs, and we have to do more.

When Jesus began his ministry, he was faced with several temptations. After he had been fasting in the wilderness for forty days and was very hungry for food, his first temptation was to use his power to turn the stones into bread, not only for food for himself, but use his power to feed the hungry of the world. But while being tempted by this course of action, he knew it would not solve all problems. He remembered the words of Moses in the Old Testament, "It is written that we human beings cannot live by

bread alone." Spiritual food is also needed. Material things alone cannot satisfy.

Thus this petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread," means more than satisfying our physical hunger. It is about other kinds of bread, as well. The word for bread in Aramaic also means understanding and truth. Remember, Jesus spoke of himself as the "bread of life." We are to live by the words of truth and guidance which come from God, as well as the basic physical necessities of life which come from God.

As we have noted earlier, the words of a prayer are not for the purpose of begging God for something, as if we would not get it without the begging. Rather the words are for us. Thus this phrase, "Give us this day our daily bread," is a reminder to us that it is God who gives us all things, both physical and spiritual. It is God who supplies our basic needs. We constantly need this reminder because in our self-righteousness, our tendency is to take all the credit for ourselves.

Jesus knew the Old Testament very well, and the book of Deuteronomy warns all of us, "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is God who gives you the power to get wealth." All things ultimately come from God.

So first of all, we have seen that this petition in the Lord's Prayer reminds us that God is concerned with all our basic necessities of life, both physical and spiritual, and that we are to be concerned with our daily bread, not just my daily bread. We are members of one human family, and anyone hungry is a family member.

Secondly, we have seen that this phrase from the Lord's Prayer reminds us that the physical necessities of life are not enough by themselves -- our lives are both physical and spiritual, and it is God who supplies our basic needs.

And now note thirdly, this phrase from the Lord's Prayer reminds us to pray for daily bread. Give us this day our daily bread. We are not praying for bread for tomorrow or for next year, but for this day.

I have no idea how many pounds of bread or food in general are consumed in the average human life, and I certainly do not know how many tons of food the whole human family will need for the next 100 years, or even the next 10 years. God does not ask us to pray for such quantities.

We do need God's bread, both physical and spiritual, every day, but it is better for us to remind ourselves daily that God supplies our basic needs. Jesus is assuming that we will be praying daily. Jesus also said, "Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself." In other words, live one day at a time.

Most of us know that worrying or being anxious about tomorrow occupies too much of our time. Henri Nouwen calls such worrying our "preoccupations." We try to fill our time and place, to occupy it, before we are there. As I have said before, we fill our mind with "what ifs." What if I get the flu? What if my child is not home on time? What if I have an accident tomorrow?

This is not to imply that all planning for the future is bad. We're not talking here about planning, but about worry and anxiousness. Too many of us worry so much about tomorrow and the day after tomorrow that we miss what's good today.

This kind of worrying fragments our lives. The many things to do, to think about for tomorrow and the next day, the many causes to attack or defend -- all these pull us apart and make us lose our center. The Lord's Prayer asks us to trust God, and so we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," already knowing that God does and will provide our daily needs. Amen.