

# The Preaching of the Word at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church

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## **“Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”** The Second in a Sermon Series on The Lord’s Prayer The Gospel according to St. Matthew 6:9-13

**The Second Sunday of Lent,      March 7, 2010**

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Of this series of sermons on The Lord’s Prayer this should be one of the shorter sermons since we don’t know what it means. We honestly do not know. The word translated “daily bread” is what is called technically a *hapax legomenon*, a word used only in The Lord’s Prayer and found nowhere else in the New Testament or ancient Greek literature.

Scholars determine what words mean by comparing their connotations as they are employed in different circumstances by different writers in different texts, but they can’t do that with this word. One of the first theologians of the church, a fellow by the name of Origen, one of the most widely read and experienced men of his age declared that he had never heard this word used in conversation or read it anywhere except as he prayed the Lord’s Prayer.<sup>1</sup> W. D. Davies Duke Divinity School wrote a three volume commentary on the gospel of Matthew totaling 2500 pages, which is to say that this is a man who knows a thing or two about the gospel of Matthew. He shakes his head when he comes to this verse saying it is, “One of the great unresolved puzzles of NT lexicography.”<sup>2</sup>

Biblical scholars still must make a translation, and they do. The word clearly seems to have connotations of bread that is “enough,” “essential,” “necessary,” “sufficient.”<sup>3</sup> Give us sufficient bread, bread for today, daily bread, enough bread.

*The problem with that translation is that we translate one word whose meaning we do not know with another word whose meaning we do not know.*

We do not know the meaning of “enough.” “Sufficient” is seldom part of our vocabulary. How often do we pray for “enough?” How often do we ask for something that is merely “sufficient?” These words are exceedingly rare in our discourse. We do not know their meanings.

To limit this petition of the Lord’s Prayer to asking for bread is too narrow a translation. The great German preacher Walter Lüthi paraphrased:

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<sup>1</sup> F. W. Beare, **The Gospel According to Matthew** (Harper and Row, 1981), p. 175-6.

<sup>2</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., **The Gospel According to Saint Matthew**, volume 1, The International Critical Commentary (T & T Clark, 1988), p. 607.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Patte, **The Gospel According to Matthew: A Structured Commentary on Matthew’s Faith** (Fortress Press, 1987), p. 104.

“Give us this day our daily bread,” that is to say: give us food and clothing, a roof over our head and whatever else our bodies need; give us work, health, freedom, and a native land; give us life without constant fear, and let there be respect for human dignity...<sup>4</sup>

This prayer trusts that God’s will “will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” even as it recognizes that human need is a matter of God’s intimate concern. Jesus teaches his followers to pray to one who concerned that they have what they need, that they have enough.

In this vein we can listen in on the prayer of an unemployed harbor worker in Ghana:

Dear God, can’t you give me work in the harbour?

To have money for wife and children.

To put my little bit in your basket next Sunday.

Please give me work, good Lord Jesus.

We praise you. Amen.<sup>5</sup>

This Ghanaian laborer prays for what he needs: money, to buy food and clothing for his family; work to do to exercise our human capacities; and a “little bit,” Lord Jesus, for “your basket next Sunday,” because without giving and sharing there is no true humanity no matter how little you have or how much you have.

A few years ago an aging infantryman remembered how in April of 1945, toward the end of the Second World War, American soldiers trudged through a little German village ravaged by artillery shelling. In the streets and alleys, there were children, with no homes to go to, dazed and afraid. The soldiers felt heartsick at the cost of war and their helplessness at repairing the chaos they had been a part of creating.

This GI reasoned that half a chocolate bar was really quite enough for him, so he broke it in half, and he gave the other half of his chocolate bar to a frightened little boy. The child did not, as the GI expected, immediately snarf down the treat. Instead the boy backed away. Other children appeared and gathered around him. The GI watched as this child broke the chocolate bar into smaller and smaller bits, so that each child might have a taste of the chocolate.

Let me elaborate, because not everyone understands the theology of chocolate. (Indeed, some people may not even be aware that there is a theology of chocolate.) To sit by yourself and savor a couple of Godiva truffles is one thing, but a quarter inch shard of broken chocolate shared in a bombed village is quite another. On a street filled with the ruins of homes broken by war a quarter inch piece of chocolate in a child’s mouth tastes like hope, it tastes like home, like the home we receive in the Kingdom of God. The little child broke the chocolate into tiny pieces so that each child might taste warm, mellow chocolate, so that everyone might taste the sweetness, so that everyone might have enough to remember how to hope.

In the Lord’s prayer, when we pray for God’s kingdom to come we also pray for **enough**. If we need a theology of chocolate, we also need a theology of enoughness. Because we do not know the meaning of “enough,” we break our lives against the walls of our too-muchness.

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Lüthi, *The Lord’s Prayer: An Exposition* (John Knox, 1961), p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> From George Appleton, editor, *The Oxford Book of Prayer* (Oxford, 1985), p. 101.

Ernest T. Campbell, former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, once prayed to God saying, “We look now to our own needs, and the wants that masquerade as needs; and pray for the wisdom to know one from the other.”<sup>6</sup> What Campbell prays for, of course, is a theology of enoughness.

“Give us this day our daily bread,” Jesus teaches his followers to pray, give us what we need, give us enough.

Before Jesus even begins his prayer “Our Father,” he assures his followers, “your Father knows what you need before you ask.” This chapter of the gospel of Matthew and this section of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount concludes with the repeated assurance, “indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (Mt. 6:32). Those two assurances bracket Jesus teaching on prayer. “Your Father knows what you need before you ask” and “your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” describe the landscape of God’s care and providing for us. It is only in that context that Jesus bids us pray for “daily bread” and the things we need; it is only in that context that Jesus tells his followers, “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear” (Mt 6:25). Take those sayings out of that context and they will inevitably sound coarse and insensitive. Jesus does not survey the economic horizon and say, “Well, let’s pray we have enough.” He does not read **The Wall Street Journal** and therefore conclude, “Do not worry...what you will eat or what you will drink.” Rather Jesus, out of his deep communion with God, teaches his followers of God’s utter trustworthiness. God is One we may address “Abba, Father,” and Jesus assures us, “Your Father knows what you need before you ask.”

In a time filled with economic anxiety we may have reached a teachable moment when the truth of the gospel can penetrate our self-sufficiency. Jesus teaches us to pray for “daily bread,” for “enough.” Slowly, slowly, we begin to learn what these words mean as we pray to one who knows what we need before we ask: “Abba, Father.”

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<sup>6</sup> Ernest T. Campbell, *Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life: Prayers of a City Pastor* (Association Press, 1973), p. 63.