

The Republican Convention has just concluded and the Democratic Convention begins tomorrow. We are straddling a low point in our national political discourse characterized by name-calling, personal attacks and intentional distortions. If that weren't enough, last Sunday while we were still in church, three law enforcement officers were shot and killed in Baton Rouge, and then last Thursday, police shot an unarmed black man in North Miami.

Seems an essential moment for us to talk about prayer. A ripe moment to join with the disciple who said, "Lord, teach us to pray."

The prayer that Jesus taught, as Fr. John Koenig has pointed out, is among the shortest of the daily disciplines in the world's great religions. "But," Koenig writes, "to the eyes of Christian faith it shimmers like the most precious of diamonds. When we pray it, allowing ourselves to be centered in the kingdom petition, a prism effect occurs. With light from the Spirit, other parts of the prayer fan out into a rainbow-like display of what it means for us to participate in the coming reign of God.¹"

In times of turbulence like these, we can lose sight of that prism effect and wonder what it means to participate now in the in-breaking of God's heaven. Even the words of this treasured prayer can begin to feel insufficient. Fortunately, we can reinvigorate the prayer that Jesus taught us so that both the prayer itself and the Spirit within us can once again, as Koenig puts it, "encourage our imaginations to paint with the full palette of the kingdom."

There is a French Carmelite monastery on the Mount of Olives. The church at the monastery is called the Church of the Pater Noster because it stands on the site taken to be where Jesus taught the prayer named for the first words: "Our Father," in Latin. The church and cloister walls feature mosaics of the prayer in more than a hundred different languages.

But to taste the complexity of the teaching itself, we do well to go back to the language that Jesus spoke: Aramaic. You see, the translations that we are so familiar with are based on Greek manuscripts. And we rightly treasure those translations, but the poetic slipperiness and rich mysticism of Aramaic allows us to see with fresh eyes the rainbow produced by this most precious of diamonds.

¹ Koenig, John. *Rediscovering New Testament Prayer: Boldness and Blessing in the Name of Jesus*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004.

In the passage immediately before today's Gospel, Jesus showed his friends Martha and Mary that putting God at the center of our contemplation and our activity is the "better part." It follows that Jesus teaches his disciples to open their prayer by addressing God, the intimate creator of us *all*.

And so "Our Father" makes sense, but the Aramaic word that Jesus knew, "abwoon," implies a parenting dynamic that transcends our varying human ideas of male and female. The rest of the phrase refers to that which "rises and shines in space"² and then asks God to open the eyes of our hearts so that we can see more of God's character; that all of creation might come to see more of who God really is. And so the opening of this ancient prayer can be accurately rendered as: "Our Birther, transcendent generator of all the Kosmos, be to us truly what you most deeply are."

The prayer then invites God to use us, collectively and individually, as the holy space to begin the birthing process of a unity with the Creator. A harmony of desires, in which the Divine and all of creation move toward God's deepest yearning through our earthly lives. The prayer that Jesus taught his disciples is not about leaving this earth to go heaven. The prayer is about joining with God to bring heaven here to earth. And so, having addressed the source of our being, we invite God into the holy spaces of our lives as if to say: "Create your reign of unity now. Your one desire then acts with ours; as in the unity of all light, so in the spectrum of all forms³."

Having evoked the most inclusive image of the Divine One who created us and lives and breathes in us all, we turn next to the Divine Many, the wealth of forms in God's creation. From the tender love of the ultimate parent, we ask for the most practical of blessings with an Aramaic word that means both "bread" and "understanding." With that one word, the prayer reminds us of the wisdom of caring for each other and for the earth that provides the most basic support of life for every living creature on the planet.

Realizing that there is no need for fear-based hoarding that keeps God's abundance from our brothers and sisters, we pray, "Grant what we need each day in bread and insight." This is the only material request in the entire prayer and we ask, not just for ourselves, but on behalf of all creation.

Next, we move further into a self-reflective and self-emptying posture. We ask God to help us to relax our desires for vengeance so that we can seek first the restorative light of forgiveness. The Aramaic word that we translate as

² Douglas-Klotz, Neil. *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990.

³ This and all the Aramaic translations that follow are based on or quoted from the research of Neil Douglas-Klotz.

“sin” can also be more poetically rendered as “tangled threads.” The word we translate as “forgiveness” can equally be interpreted as “to embrace with emptiness,” a phrase that captures the cleansing act of release. Our prayer put more poetically might read: “Loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of others’ guilt.”

This request is both social and personal; both collective and individual. “The quality of human life on the planet,” wrote Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “is nothing more than the sum total of our daily interactions. Forgiveness is the way we mend tears in the social fabric. It is the way we stop our human community from unraveling.”⁴

Now we come to what may be the least understood phrase in the entire prayer. In the Aramaic, there is no outside influence leading anyone into temptation, least of all God, whose primary desire for us is unity and love. The phrase has more to do with losing sight of one’s purpose.

You see, the prayer Jesus taught reminds us that despite all the suffering we create for ourselves and others, our origins are in God’s Divine breath. But if we are not mindful, we can fall asleep to God’s grace all around us or we can become so self-absorbed that we delay or get distracted from acting when the time is right. And so a more life-affirming interpretation of the phrase could read something more like: “Don’t let surface things delude us, but free us from what holds us back from our true purpose.”

Jesus taught his disciples to call upon the One who loves us all and to pray on behalf of one another. This maintains a relationship between the Giver of all things and the petitioner—the recipient of God’s Holy Spirit. God’s heaven is increasingly revealed as the Spirit works through, among and around us. The church, and you and I, individually and collectively, we are the prisms through which the One Light streams and refracts into glorious rainbows. That’s what it means for us to participate in the coming reign of God.

Ask and the Holy Spirit will be given. Search and you will find the Holy Spirit. Knock and the Holy Spirit is already opening the door. Do you see? The answer promised is the gift of God’s increasing presence. “If you then, who are evil”—and let me just pause there for another Aramaic rephrasing—“If you then who are *unripe* or *who are acting inappropriately* know how to give good

⁴Tutu, Desmond and Mpho A. Tutu. *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*. New York: HarperOne, 2014.

gifts to your children, how much more will the One Birther give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?”

The phrase “how much more?” springs easily to the lips these days, does it not? How much more, God, can we take of racism, vengeance and hatred? How much more homophobia, misogyny, blame and character assassination? And “how much more,” is Jesus’ response. “How much more will God, the source of life and all goodness and beauty and truth, how *much more* will God outpour the Holy Spirit.”

I need to hear those words from Jesus today. They provide the context that I need to find meaning in the chaos. Perhaps you, too, need the context of God’s in-breaking heaven and our role in God’s work. So when you pray, intend some version of this: “Our Birther, transcendent generator of all the Kosmos, be to us truly what you most deeply are. Create your reign of unity now. Your one desire then acts with ours; as in the unity of all light, so in the spectrum of all forms. Grant what we need each day in bread and insight. Loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of others’ guilt. Don’t let surface things delude us, but free us from what holds us back from our true purpose.”

May it truly be so.