

March 15, 2009

“This day...”

Matthew 6: 7-15

Sometimes in the morning, when we are still half asleep, before we've had our first cup of coffee, we fill up a bowl with cereal, go to the refrigerator, pull out the milk, twist off the cap, wave it under our nose...and gag. The milk has spoiled. When we look at the date printed on the carton, we are appalled to see that it expired a week ago. It is not a pleasant way to start a new day.

Some things don't keep very long. Milk is one of them. Prayer is another. Prayer has a very short shelf life. It only lasts for a day. “Give us *this* day our daily bread.” At the end of the day, that prayer has expired and has to be replaced with another prayer. And the expiration date on that new prayer also runs out after 24 hours.

Prayer is like the manna from heaven. Remember the story of how God prevented the Hebrew people from starving to death during their forty years of wandering in the desert? They were worried that they wouldn't be able to find enough food to eat in the harsh wilderness of the Sinai and they complained bitterly to Moses. But God said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. (Exodus 16:4)” Each morning when the dew lifted there was a fine flaky substance that tasted like wafers of honey, and they called it “manna”, the bread of heaven. They could only gather as much manna as they could consume in one day. If they gathered more and tried to hang on to it longer than one day, it spoiled. Prayer is like manna. It is the spiritual food that sustains our relationship with God. But it only lasts for a day.

Last week our readings from the fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel focused on some of the most demanding ethical challenges in all of scripture. The very first lessons Jesus taught his followers in the Sermon on the Mount weren't about doctrine or Christology or salvation. They were moral lessons about living lives that are free of the corrupting influences of anger, lust, deceit, vengeance, and hatred. But the very next thing that he taught his followers was that it is impossible to fulfill those demanding ethical challenges without being in prayer every single day.

“Give us *this day* our daily bread... forgive us as we forgive others... lead us not into temptation....” Even our best prayers expire at the end of the day.

People who are recovering from addictions know the truth of the *this day* clause in Jesus' model prayer. They know, from their own experiences of trying and failing to control their own addictive behaviors, that they cannot sustain a lifetime of sobriety. Their commitment to sobriety runs out at the end of the day and has to be renewed again the next morning. “One day at a time” is one of the slogans embraced by people in twelve-step programs.

The *this day* clause also pertains to controlling our anxieties. Later on in this chapter on prayer, Jesus says, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.” No matter how hard we try, we can not live worry free lives. But we can pray ourselves calm *this day*.

“Do not worry about tomorrow,” said Jesus, “for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.” Today when you find yourself worrying that you won't have enough of what ever you need, “look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather food into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them.” Today when you find yourself worrying about your job or your paycheck or the bills that need to be paid, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all of his glory was not

clothed like one of these. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you - you of little faith?"

Remembering the birds of the air and lilies of the field will not cure your anxieties once and for all. Praying that prayer will not permanently transform you into someone who lives a worry-free life. But it can help you pray yourself calm *this day*. "Do not worry about tomorrow," said Jesus, "tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." Give us *this day* our daily bread... forgive us as we forgive others *this day*... lead us not into temptation *this day*.

If you are married or involved in a relationship with someone you care deeply about, you know that you can't go for more than a day without being in contact with each other. We can't be aware of our partners every moment of every day. We're not mindful of our marriage relationships when we are sitting at our desks preoccupied with our work, or when we are asleep at night and unaware of anything going on around us, or when we are out with friends, or when we are busy with activities that require our attention.

But in order for a relationship to be significant, we do have to be in close contact with each other every single day. The intimacy we share with our partners has a short shelf life. That has to be renewed every day. We have to be attentive to each other, we have to check in with each other, talk about what is going on in our lives, share quiet moments together, make plans for our future together. Even when we have to be apart from each other for days at a time, we keep in touch every day by phone, or if we can't talk, we at least think about each other.

In a similar way, prayer is an ongoing, daily dialogue that makes our relationship with God significant. If you only pray when you come to church on Sunday morning or Wednesday evening, or if you tune in on the radio and worship with us at home, then your relationship with God will never become a very significant part of your life. If your prayer life is sporadic, if you only pray when you happen to think about it, or when something comes up that you need extra help with, or when you finally have a quiet moment when the phone isn't ringing and there is nothing else demanding your attention, chances are good that your previous prayer has already expired and your spiritual life has begun to spoil. Prayer has a very short shelf life. It only lasts for a day, and then it has to be replaced by a new prayer that will also expire after 24 hours.

During this forty-day season of Lent that prepares us for Easter, we've been praying through Matthew's gospel together and we've been learning some important lessons about things that help us sustain a daily prayer life.

We've learned that it is helpful for us to share our prayer lives with each other. Jesus warned us against making public displays of prayer and said, "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." Prayer is deeply personal, but that should never prevent us from supporting each other in prayer.

For the past few weeks, some of us have been meeting together in small groups to talk about the insights and discoveries we've been experiencing as we prayerfully reflect on brief passages of Mathew's gospel.

We bring our prayer journals along with us and talk about how God has spoken to each of us through the words of scripture. Others of us have been participating in an "on-line" conversation through a blog we've set up on our church's web site (www.fccbc.org/blog).

The conversations we've been having with each other have been deeply inspiring. We've all been enriched by the variety of insights and perspectives shared by others. And talking with each other about our prayer lives has helped us be more accountable about setting aside time to pray every day.

The other thing we've discovered, is that it is really helpful to allow scripture to guide our prayers. Instead of praying about whatever drifts in or out of our awareness each day, praying through Matthew's gospel gives us a chance to be in conversation with Jesus while we pray. What a great prayer partner Jesus makes! He challenges us to consider things we would otherwise avoid, and comforts us with understandings we would never develop on our own.

When we prayerfully reflect on passages of scripture, we invite Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Aaron, Ruth and Naomi, Esther and Job, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jesus and Mary, Peter and Paul, Priscilla and Aquila...the whole great cloud of witnesses to guide and challenge and comfort and inspire us in prayer.

Prayer has a very short shelf life. So pray every day. Form supportive relationships with other people who are committed to prayer, and pray in thoughtful conversation with those whose stories and testimonies are recorded in the scriptures.

Don't let your spiritual life be spoiled by prayers that have passed their expiration dates. Amen.