Our gospel lesson from Luke follows right on the heels of our lessons for the last two weeks – the good Samaritan and Jesus’ words to Martha that Mary chose the better part. If our last two weeks showed us how to love our neighbors as our selves and how to listen to God’s voice, I think that this week’s gospel gives us some insight into how our prayers, our conversations with God include our love for God & neighbor and how listening for God’s voice impacts our life.

There is a phrase attributed both to Prosper of Aquitaine and Pope Celestine I from the 5th century of the common era: The rule of prayer is the rule of belief and action. The phrase is speaking of a way of life or a ‘rule’ of life. So we might also say that a life of prayer is a life of belief and action. This rule perfectly encapsulates our gospel reading today… Prayer is a reflection of our faith and as we reflect on our faith, we’re led into action. As we reflect on our actions we’re led back to prayer and belief and the provoked to action again…

Jesus encourages the disciples to pray for the kingdom of God, for daily bread, for forgiveness & to escape the time of trial. As Jesus teaches us to pray for these things, there are implicit expectations of us. Every phrase of the Lord’s prayer could be a sermon!

Praying for God’s kingdom to come inspires us to imagine what God’s kingdom looks like. What specifically are we asking for? How will God’s kingdom come? Who will bring it? What will God’s kingdom include? Since Jesus is teaching us to ask for God’s kingdom to come, the kingdom does not come with/from Jesus. Otherwise, the disciples would already be in the kingdom – they were in the presence of Jesus. So the Kingdom of God has not yet come – it’s not fully realized.

Perhaps the kingdom of God is that place where every person has their daily bread? Give us each day our daily bread, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray. Again, this provokes questions: Who is included in ‘us’? Just you and me? Just our families and friends? Jesus didn’t teach us to say, ‘Give me today my daily bread…’ Does Jesus include ALL people in ‘us’? Give all people their daily bread? Give just Christians their daily bread? Who is included? What about those people who do not have daily bread? Do we have any responsibility to those people? Wouldn’t sharing our bread be part of God’s kingdom come? And loving our neighbors as ourselves?

Then Jesus teaches that wonderful awful phrase, ‘forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.’ Really? I imagine the disciples give Jesus a hard look at that one!

In Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, our forgiveness is dependent on our forgiving others. Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer is what we’re used to hearing – forgive us our trespasses AS we forgive those who trespass against us. I can be struggling to forgive others when I’ve been wronged but still have God’s forgivenenss, right? What we don’t hear every week is how Jesus continues the conversation about forgiveness and being forgiven in Matthew’s gospel. In Matthew 6:14 and 15, Jesus says, “for if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

What would the world look like if just Christians actually forgave everyone who had wronged us? What would the holy catholic (small c) apostolic church of God look like? What does it mean for us to
forgive? Our Psalm for today says that ‘Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.’ In God’s kingdom there is mercy and truth, righteousness and peace. Forgiveness includes telling the truth about a wrong done. Forgiveness includes acknowledging the wrong and then reconciling with justice and mercy. This is the hardest work of loving our neighbors as ourselves. Sometimes the people we need to forgive do not want to go through the reconciliation process with us. Sometimes WE are the people who need to be forgiven and we are unwilling to hear the truth about ourselves and our actions. Jesus taught that if we want God to forgive us, we’ve got to be willing to forgive others, we’ve got to be willing to tell the truth about ourselves and be reconciled with our neighbors.

So Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray and not only how we should pray but how we should live. Loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves make up the requests of this prayer. We pray for ourselves but implicit in the requests are expectations of our behavior towards others.

And do you notice that as Jesus goes on to teach the disciples about how God knows how to give good gifts just as we do, that Jesus doesn’t promise God will give us everything that we ask for? What Jesus claims God loves to give us is God’s own Holy Spirit. The answer to our prayers isn’t necessarily that we will have good weather or that we’ll get that job or the raise or that those we love will be healed. The answer to our prayers is the Holy Spirit of God.

That’s what Jesus promises. Jesus says that God will always give us the good, the very good gift of the Holy Spirit. With that gift, all our other prayers will find their rightful places. And when what we ask does not come true, God’s Spirit will teach us patience and hope and faith. God’s Spirit will teach us how to love God, how to work so that God’s kingdom comes. God’s Spirit will show us how to share our daily bread so that none lack, so that no one goes hungry. God’s Spirit will teach us how to forgive those who harm us, those who are indebted to us, so that we can also ask for forgiveness with a clear conscience. And God’s Spirit will be with us when we face times of trial because we know that even though we pray to avoid them, times of trial always come.

A life of prayer is a life of faith and action. May we pray with boldness. Amen.