

“God’s Holy Name”

July 3, 2022

The Prayer Jesus Teaches series – Sunday of July 4th weekend

When I was growing up, the United Methodist Church where I worshiped gathered with the Presbyterian Church that kitty-corner around Mason’s town square every July 4th weekend. We worshiped outside when we could, and it was always interesting to listen when we prayed the Lord’s Prayer together. Methodists say “forgive us our trespasses...”, and Presbyterians say “forgive us our debts...” As a kid, I wondered about why we used different wording, but the prayer still brought us together.

It’s happened to me more times than I can count in the past 21 years serving in pastoral ministry. I’ve prayed the Lord’s Prayer in worship, at weddings, at funerals, at the hospital, in people’s homes during visits, and more. It’s the way we wrap up our prayer time – with this prayer we have in common. Perhaps it has some slight differences, but when we gather with other followers of Jesus, the prayer Jesus teaches is part of our time together.

We find this prayer in both Matthew and Luke. For this series, we’ll use Matthew’s version. It’s a part of the Sermon on the Mount – the foundational teachings of Jesus. And it comes right after Jesus offers some caution about how, what, when, and why we pray. Jesus is clear: make sure you’re not doing this stuff so that you’ll get praise from others. It’s what God sees that matters.

Someone put it this way: “The refreshing and liberating fact is that God is not much concerned with how you pray; God is more interested in what you pray about and what your attitude is while you pray.” This seems to flow from what Jesus just addressed in the Sermon on the Mount - not just our actions, but our motivations and intentions. Yes, this is a model prayer, and a reminder of how we love God and love one another in a community.

For as comforting as this prayer is for us, the prayer Jesus teaches might have shocked those who first heard it. It wasn’t that prayer itself was anything new - faithful Jews prayed in all kinds of ways – prayers of praise, lament, and blessing. It was how Jesus prayed that was so different - and new.

Jesus offered this prayer at a time when the Roman Empire dominated. People of faith faced persecution under Rome’s reign, and it was important and urgent to claim God’s Kingdom - God’s rule and order – even above those who were

in power. Those who follow Jesus are called to think differently and act differently from the rest of the world. We're called to pray differently than those who are seeking acclaim and attention for themselves. We need not be loud and showy or extra wordy. Volume and length do nothing for us. Prayer is a reminder of our dependence on God, and our need for sincerity and humility when we pray is clear.

Even in the first phrase - *Our Father in heaven* - Jesus claims God as Father of all, which might have drawn a gasp. Jesus is claiming his authority and inviting to see ourselves differently in relationship to God and to each other. We are all God's children, called to follow.

Jesus prays for God's name to be hallowed (to be holy), God's will to be done, and God's kingdom to come—and for strength to carry out the commands he's given earlier on in the sermon. We call it the Lord's Prayer, but it's really the Disciples' Prayer - not so much a formula - but a way of understanding prayer and connection to God and each other. This is so much about *how we pray* rather than *what we pray*. One person says that it's really a community empowerment prayer about being in relationship with God and each other.

Prayer is about nurturing a relationship with God who created us, loves us, knows us, and wants us to know our Creator God more intimately. Conversation and connection are vital when we care about a relationship. We know that's true for human relationships. When we fall away from regular contact, we feel it. Staying connected is important.

The purpose of prayer isn't for us to ask for what we want, but to recognize what we need. That's important to reflect on, especially because we might come with a list of what we want rather than opening ourselves to what we need. It's not for us to get what we want, but it can shape our lives and help us to shape the world. Pastor Adam Hamilton says that we don't pray to inform God or to convince God, but we've been there, right? "Prayer is less about asking God to do something than it is about expressing our heart to God and opening ourselves to God's will."

The Lord's Prayer certainly offers us insight into how we pray. But the danger is that it becomes rote and routine rather than real. And maybe you've been there, saying the words, but really not praying the prayer.

It's a prayer that stays with us, but I hope we're not stuck. Some of the most powerful moments I've witnessed are centered around the Lord's Prayer. I've shared with you before that I remember Ana reciting the words as a young child because she had overheard them prayed when she joined me on home visits.

And this prayer is so deeply embedded in us that it's remembered even when people struggle with memory loss or other illnesses. When someone joins in praying these words, even when they can't remember names or faces, it's a holy time.

Roberta Bondi says that the Lord's Prayer is a tool to help us love God and love neighbor. "The language and content" of this prayer "are making political statements about power, authority, and social order that are intended to shape social relationships as well as our relationship with God. When we pray, it's an act of dependence on God. It is an act of faith. In this moment when we recognize the independence of our nation, this prayer reminds us that we're ultimately citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus offers this prayer not as a command, but as a gift. It's not simply a formula or magic words or a rule to follow, but a way for us to nurture our relationship with God and each other. Prayer is ultimately about our relationship with God – talking and listening, communicating honestly and openly, growing more deeply and connecting. But if I'm honest, I can get caught in the talking part and forget about the listening part.

God is about the business of transformation – helping us to love God and others better. The prayer that Jesus teaches can help us do that, especially if we dig more deeply into its meaning rather than simply reciting it. We truly need to pray it and allow it to move us to action.

Our Father - "Abba" is the Aramaic term Jesus used for father. The word reflects a child's term of endearment (mama, papa), and it's an intimate picture of the relationship that Jesus calls us into with God. God can be trusted. God cares for all of us. Jesus says, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father."

For those who might struggle with identifying God as Father, there's an invitation to see God as Father first as a model – loving, just, compassionate, present, kind, merciful, gracious. Our relationship with our earthly fathers may be positive, life-giving, and loving, or it may be very difficult or somewhere in-between, but God is the example of what a loving parent is meant to be. We need to acknowledge that as we pray as well as understanding that God is beyond gender. Jesus offers this as a reminder of how God is our loving Parent, but it's not meant to put a limit on who God is or how we understand God's love.

"Our Father" puts us into relationship with everyone – everyone. We're connected to everyone. That may be a struggle because we're fairly individualistic in how we view our spiritual lives.

When Jesus uses “our,” he reminds us that it’s not just about me. We’re praying for unity with others in faith, which God helps to nurture. We don’t do this alone, but we depend on God to help us, so that phrase challenges us to start from a place of humility and sincerity.

Another important part is the grammar, especially as we move to the next phrase, “Hallowed by your name.” This is an imperative – a command. Father Michael Gillis, an Orthodox priest, digs into the structure as a way to help us understand what we’re praying. The first command is passive, so it’s really saying, “Let your name be hallowed (holy).”

When we read it that way, it’s more than just an acknowledgment that God’s name is holy; it’s a call for us to make God’s name holy, and ancient scholars connected it to the modifying phrase “on earth as it is in heaven.” So, we might read it and pray it like this: “Let Your name be holy (as in heaven, so on earth).”

Again, there’s a call to humility here. We acknowledge that we’ve contributed to God’s name being profaned – not holy. In Gillis’ words, “My brokenness contributes to the brokenness of others.” Even so, we pray to live faithfully to make God’s name holy – giving glory to God and seeing God in one another.

But we also need to be careful not to create an image of God where holiness means terror, fear, or judgment. To lift up God’s holiness is to realize that God is God, and I am not. To lift up God’s holiness is to celebrate the beauty of God’s good creation and stand in awe of God’s goodness and grace to us. Gregory of Nyssa, a bishop in the early church who lived in the 300s AD, said that when we pray “hallowed be your name,” we’re praying for an ability to mirror the characteristics of God so that anyone looking at us can see in us something of who God is. That’s a challenge - that anyone looking at us can see in us something of who God is.

In the early church, this prayer wasn’t used as much corporately as we do now. One document called the Didache, encourages people to pray three times a day, and I wonder how our prayer life would change if we prayed this prayer at least daily? If I would have prayed this prayer in the moment when someone cut in front of me at the gas station, maybe I’d have reacted differently. Would I have been more patient and loving than the glare I gave? How would it change us if we prayed this prayer three times a day?

Right away, Jesus puts us in a community when we pray. We are God’s beloved children - that’s where we start. And we focus on God first - God’s holiness, God’s Kingdom, and God’s will - not our own. And we’re called to remember that it’s

not just about us. In a time when division and polarization seem more prevalent than unity, this prayer that Jesus teaches may help us talk to each other and nurture those relationships.

God is as close to us as our next breath, and God's glory fills the earth and the heavens. There's both the intimacy and the awe that we feel. To recognize God's holiness means that we speak to God's reputation. We follow through on the prayer when we praise and honor God in our words and actions – reflecting God's goodness and love.

Pastor Adam Hamilton makes the point that it's almost like the positive spin on the commandment about not taking the Lord's name in vain. Rather, we're called to make it holy. And there's plenty for us to do to make God's name holy and to reflect who God is to others. Perhaps the question for us is one that Hamilton asks: What do others know of God by watching you? What do others know of God by watching me?

As we come to the table to receive a simple meal that reminds us of God's sustaining grace, as we pray this prayer with new words, I pray that it's fresh for our ears and reminds us of the call to love God and love others. I pray that we'd nurture our connections and reflect God's holiness. Let us pray as we come to the table...