

***Our Father...***  
Matthew 6:9-13

*I repeat: to know how to say the Our Father, and to know how to put it into practice, this is the perfection of the Christian life.*

Pope John XXIII

Over the years children have been known to give some interesting interpretations of the Lord's Prayer. One little girl began her pray like this: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hello! What be Thy name?" Another girl of six updated the prayer to the smog age, saying, "Give us this day our daily breath." A five-year old who was trying to cope with Sunday school and kindergarten at the same time came up with a blend of church and state: "Give us this day our daily bread, and liberty and justice for all." It's not hard to imagine what inspired one boy to include this line: "Forgive us our dentists, as we forgive our dentists."<sup>1</sup>

Children are often more honest than most of us in asking questions about the prayer. Why do we have to say it every Sunday? What does it mean anyway? They make us aware of the fact that because the Lord's Prayer is so familiar and repeated so frequently, it is in danger of becoming a routine act that is void of meaning. That is why we are going to explore the Lord's Prayer this Lenten season, to infuse it with new meaning and new life, and to allow it to enliven other aspects of our prayer life as well. In our time of prayer later in worship, we will also be praying various translations of the Lord's Prayer as a way to revitalize it.

The Lord's Prayer is found in two places in the Bible: in the sixth chapter of Matthew as we heard, and in the eleventh chapter of Luke. In Matthew Jesus shares the prayer along with other instructions about prayer with the crowd gathered for the Sermon on the Mount. Luke sets the prayer in a different context. There Jesus and his disciples have withdrawn from the crowds and gone away to a quiet place. That was a custom of Jesus in Luke. This time the disciples ask, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." The Lord's Prayer offers Jesus' instruction in how to pray. It is a model prayer and a model for all our prayer. Jesus teaches us to pray with simplicity and brevity, focusing on the core of what is truly necessary for soul, body, and life.

Church historian Roberta Bondi reports that in "the early church, the Lord's Prayer was considered to be so precious that nobody was even allowed to learn it until the very end of the three-year training period before

being baptized.”<sup>2</sup> The prayer was a means of training Christians for love in their distinctive manner of life.

The structure of the prayer is very basic. It begins with an opening address: Our Father, who art in heaven. It continues with three petitions concerning God: Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done. Then there are three petitions concerning the needs of human being: Give us our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. First we offer to God our respect, honor, and hope. Then we seek from God the things most essential: food, forgiveness, and freedom. The prayer concludes with a closing doxology which is not found in the biblical texts but was probably added by the church in the second century: Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

The prayer is rooted in Judaism. There is scarcely a phrase that cannot be matched in the Jewish prayer tradition. Listen to the opening lines of the Jewish *Kaddish* and note the similarities:

*Glorified and hallowed be his great name in the world  
which he created according to his will.*

*May he let his dominion reign  
during your lives and in your days  
and in the lifetimes of the whole house of Israel  
in haste and in imminent time.*

*Praise is his great name forever and ever.*<sup>3</sup>

The first two petitions of the *Kaddish* mention God’s holy name and God’s kingdom. In Jesus’ prayer the language is simpler, the petitions quite direct, and the prayer itself shorter than most. Nevertheless, in style and content it is Jewish.

The prayer was probably not taught to the disciples in Hebrew, nor in the Greek in which the New Testament was written. Most scholars believe the prayer was phrased in the everyday Aramaic spoken by Jesus.

This morning we are going to look at the opening address, “Our Father who art in heaven,” and the first petition concerning God, “hallowed be thy name.”

The first word deserves some thoughtful consideration: Our. Throughout the prayer the first-person plural is used for praise and confession. Jesus’ example of prayer assumes community. Even when we pray these words in solitude, we do so as part of God’s community and with Jesus who teaches us to pray. The prayer arises out of social solidarity with the Christian community and with all of humankind. It is prayed with

others and on behalf of ourselves and our neighbors. God is the God of all people.

In the prayer, Jesus calls God “Father.” In the Hebrew culture of the time, “father” designated not only a parent, but often a respected clan chief whose word carried great weight. The clan chief directed the life of the clan and provided for its prosperity. His authority was awesome and he was held in great respect.<sup>4</sup>

This historical understanding helps us see dual dimensions of God the Father. God is Father like a parent to whom we are related. As Jesus has a filial relationship to God, we, too, are welcomed into an intimate family relationship to God. Like a parent, God is eager to hear from us and ever attentive to our needs. In addition to being like a personal parent, God is also like a spiritual leader, like the clan chief who offers direction and great influence over other lives.

Theologian Marjorie Suchocki says that in the patriarchal society of biblical days, “one’s father determines one’s place: The child of the king is given more importance than the child of the outcast. But Jesus gives us all the highest lineage possible when he draws us into the ‘our’ of naming God’s own self our ‘Father.’ If God is my father and yours, are we not one in value? Is not the social ranking of higher and lower immediately overturned?...By inviting us together to name God as ‘our Father,’ Jesus replaced social privilege with the humble privilege of the Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus levels the playing field when he teaches us to pray, “Our Father.” All of us are equal as children of a loving, guiding God.

As “Our Father,” God is intimate, personal, and near to us, but God is also “in heaven.” God is a high and holy Parent, beyond all human definitions. No word or image or phrase in our human language can fully capture the essence of God. Even all the images of our opening prayer together cannot describe God’s being. God is above, transcendent, mysterious, and awesome. The symbol of heaven points toward the origin of God’s rule and the locus of divine governance. From the heavenly realm, our prayers will be heard and answered.

In the first line of the prayer, “Our Father, who art in heaven,” we have a sense of both God’s nearness and God’s otherness, God’s accessibility and God’s distance. We enter into the presence of one who is like a loving Parent embracing us with grace, while at the same time standing above and apart, shrouded in a cloud of mystery evoking awe and wonder. “Our Father, who art in heaven.”

The image of heaven leads us to the three petitions that call upon the purpose and desires of God to be done. By this order, Jesus teaches us to

place the purpose and will of God above our own needs. The first step of prayer is to place ourselves under God's rule and will, subordinating our own needs to God's good design for all the created order.

The first petition is, "Hallowed be thy name." "Holy is your name." This petition is both asking God to make his name holy and pledging ourselves not to misuse God's name. Remember the commandment that prohibits taking the Lord's name in vain - yet how frequently we hear God's name taken in vain, rather than hallowed. We are to keep God's name sacred not only in word, but also in deed. Our whole lives witness to the holiness of God within us. Do our conduct and conversations reflect the sanctity of God's presence within us and within others? Is there a disconnect between the songs we sing and the prayers we pray on Sunday and the respect we give God and neighbor in the ethics that guide our everyday decisions? The larger evils of war and genocide as well as the petty nastiness in our personal relationships are indications that we humans are not always respecting the holy image of God in others. Many of the moral and social problems of our day may be rooted in our failure to respect the holiness of God.

The first petition of prayer is a matter of relating to God, of making God the center of our lives, of hallowing the name of God, of respecting the image of God in others. When we recognize and respect the holiness of God, then we will know how to live. Our actions will flow from our relationship with God. When our hearts are bent in the direction of the Holy One, our lives will reflect the ethics of God.

A college professor tells of a student who was the first person in his family to go to college. When someone offered the student some illegal drugs saying, "Go ahead, try it. It'll make you feel good," the student replied, "No."

"Don't be so uptight," said the drug dealer. "Nobody is going to know that you tried a little dope, got a little high."

"That's not the point," said the student. "The point is that my mother cleaned houses and washed floors to send me to this college. I am here because of her. I am here for her. I wouldn't do anything that might demean her sacrifice for me."<sup>6</sup>

That comes close to how we are to react to the holy God. When God is honored, all life is sacred. When God is dishonored, nothing is sacred. Christians don't steal, they don't cheat in their marriages, they don't bless violence. With President Abraham Lincoln, we should be concerned not that God is on our side, but rather we should worry earnestly whether we are on God's side.

In praying the Lord's Prayer, in naming the holiness of God, we discover not just who God is but also who we are. We belong to God. We are named and claimed as God's own. We are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light" (I Peter 2:9).

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name."

Our Father in heaven, thy name be hallowed;  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us the wrong we have done,  
as we have forgiven those who have wronged us.  
And do not bring us to the test, but save us from the evil one.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, for ever.  
Amen.

*The New English Bible*

<sup>1</sup> Dick Van Dyke, *Faith, Hope and Hilarity* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 143-145.

<sup>2</sup> Roberta C. Bondi, *A Place to Pray: Reflections on the Lord's Prayer* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by David Buttrick, *Speaking Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> Buttrick, p. 142-143.

<sup>5</sup> Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *In God's Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1996), pp. 105-106.

<sup>6</sup> William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 48-49.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon  
Lafayette United Methodist Church  
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