

**Sermon Series: *The Lord's Prayer for Today***

**I. "Hallowed Be Your Name"**

**Matthew 6: 5-13**

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*Pray then in this way: Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name."  
Matthew 6: 9*

When a doctoral student at Princeton asked, "What is left in the world for original dissertation research?"

Albert Einstein replied, "Find out about prayer. Someone must find out about prayer."(1)

Today, we begin a five-Sunday series of sermons exploring the subject of prayer, using as our principle resource, "one of the shortest and yet most profound prayers in human history." (2) From its earliest days, the church has prayed the prayer the Lord taught his disciples to pray. The prayer appears in two of the four Gospels, the shorter version in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, the longer version in the Sermon on the Mount in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. In Luke, the disciples ask for help in praying. In Matthew, the Lord's Prayer comes in a series of three teachings involving the most important aspects of religious devotion in both Judaism and the practice of Christian discipleship: alms-giving, fasting and prayer. (3)

Obviously, the early church was in need of clarity and correction concerning prayer. From reading the Sermon on the Mount, one can assume that prayer had become a matter of public performance instead of communication with God. (4) The synagogue and the street corners were filled with people who loved to impress others with their piety and verbosity. Among the Gentiles, prayers were offered to any and every god to make sure that every base was covered and every god would be pleased. Words were heaped upon words. Jesus said - you do not need to do that. "Your father knows what you need even before you ask."

I am going to go out on a limb here, but it appears to me that the church of today and that Christians of today could use a little clarity and

correction regarding prayer. Though some of the points of confusion might be different from 2,000 years ago, I believe we could benefit from a refresher course on prayer from the teachings of the Master, whose life of prayer kept him in constant communication with the One who was the source of his strength. In the wilderness of temptation, in the midst of daily stress, in the face of his enemies, when confronted with great human need, when weary, when joyful, when speaking truth to power, when in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he was crucified on Calvary's hill, Jesus prayed to God his Father. His life was simply, completely, and profoundly a life of prayer. He could not have redeemed the world without prayer.

It amazes me that you and I often live our own lives as if we did not need what Jesus himself so deeply needed. Though we need to pray a lot more than Jesus did, we find ourselves so often running all over the place with our anxieties. We do everything in the world except take the advice of the Psalmist: "Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46) God is the Alpha and the Omega, the only One who will outlast all the princes of the earth, the One who never faints or grows weary, the One who will walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death, the One who has as been our dwelling place in all generations.

The spiritual discipline of prayer is the way we remember that our lives are lived before God.

Prayer is the way we create what Henry Nouwen refers to as that "space in which God can act, space in which something can happen that you had not planned on or counted on." It will not happen if you are taking up all the room. Creating space for God is what the spiritual discipline of prayer does.

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, writes, "Usually our thoughts are all over the place, running after this and that and the other. The process of prayer is the steady, quiet drawing in and settling of all those tentacles that keep wriggling out to lay hold of the world. In prayer, we gather back in; we gather all those tentacles back into our heart. By this we become what we are. We sit there and become again a creature in the hand of God," having remembered that it is God who made us and not we ourselves.

I went one evening last week to the Atlanta History Center to see the King Papers on exhibition there. It is an indescribably moving thing to read notes in Dr. King's handwriting outlining the remarks he was about to deliver at the funeral of the little girls who were killed in the Birmingham church bombing, to see the *Letter from the Birmingham City Jail*, to read the Nobel Prize acceptance speech, and the Nobel Lecture, which I quoted from last week in this pulpit: page after page on yellow legal paper, written in his hand in red pen. How utterly grounded his words were in the rich soil of his faith, which he regularly nourished with prayer.

You cannot preach if you do not pray. You cannot work day and night for justice and setting the world right again, unless you have spiritual strength. You will run out of energy; you will break down. You will get weary, and you cannot go on. You cannot offer water to others if your own well is dry. You cannot have a good society on this earth if you have lost your spiritual connection with heaven. Without the spiritual connection, we begin to operate on the assumption that it's all about us and that everything in the world belongs to us and not to God.

I think of that portion of the Lord's Prayer that reads, "Give us this day, our daily bread". If that prayer were to be written by American society today, it would likely read, Give **me** this day, **my** daily bread, " forgetting that Jesus taught us to pray in the first person plural: "Give **us** . . ."

Did you know there is no doctrine of the survival of the fittest in the Gospel of Jesus Christ? (5) Our Lord taught us to pray with the understanding that there are brothers and sisters to whom we are intrinsically connected in the family of God. I think of that unsettling scene given in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew as the Son of Man sits on the throne at the final judgment. He explains why those on his left hand were not to be heirs of eternal life. He says simply, "I was hungry, and ye fed me not."

We need to pray to save our souls, and yet we don't know how to pray. Some feel self-conscious about prayer, worried about getting the words right and not wanting to ask too much, so they do not pray, except for perhaps a quick word before the pot roast gets cold at the dinner table. Others think they know how to pray, and pray a good deal. Some of

them **ought** to be self-conscious about their prayers, but they are not. Their prayers are chit-chats with God. They keep a working list of requests going, which might include anything from getting help in finding the remote control for the television, to making a million dollars. “Lord give me what I want and give it to me now.”

These prayer habits are a long way from those of a pastor I met some years ago. I was in Hungary for a gathering of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. I was invited to preach in a church one Sunday morning. There was a translator for my sermon from English to Hungarian, but no one sat next to me to translate the rest of the service for me. It didn't matter. When the pastor prayed, a spirit of reverence and awe filled the sanctuary. Every eye was closed, and every head was bowed. I understood not a word, but I actually understood everything, because through the power of the Spirit and the universality of the language of prayer, we journeyed together - those Hungarians and I – straight to the throne of grace. The pastor's voice was soft, yet strong. I have no idea how long the prayer lasted, but it remains today one of the mountaintop experiences of my life. God's name was hallowed, not manipulated. There was no egotistical effort to get what was wanted. There was simply trust, prayer directed to the ear and heart of God from people who believed from the core of their being that God cared for them individually and collectively.

In his classic book on prayer, Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, “Belief by itself is a map of the unvisited land of God's loving care. Prayer is actually taking the journey, the means by which we travel the landscape” of God's loving care.

Of course, many in our day are too cynical or skeptical to take the journey. With war and suffering in the world rising like the flood waters in New Orleans after Katrina, people ask, “What good does prayer do?” As one has put it, “Prayer seems a spasm of words lost in cosmic indifference.” Yet, even the most hopeless cynic is still a human being, and in every human heart, God has placed a yearning for God. As St. Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”

Jesus knew we needed to pray and he taught us to pray saying, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”

The key word is the word “Father”, a radical word, radical in the sense of offering a basic change of thinking about the very nature of God, how we are to understand and address the Almighty. Our modern ears hear that masculine metaphor, and we rightfully ask about the incompleteness of the image and the effect of a wholly masculine understanding of God on the Church’s understanding of the dignity and role of women. This is an important subject that requires more attention and time than we have today. Suffice it to say today, there are rich, wonderful feminine images for God in Scripture: my favorite from Isaiah – the Lord asks, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even those may forget, but do not worry my children, I will never forget you.” (Isaiah 49)

When Jesus teaches us to pray “Our Father, ” he is offering us the form of address he used most often in his prayers. What he is saying is that the radical omnipotent, omniscient, almighty Creator, who caused the earth to come in to being and the seas to roar, the Holy One whose name is too sacred to be spoken from human lips, who is high and lifted up, whose glory fills the whole earth, is bending down to hear our prayer as a loving father might stop everything to listen to his child. And not just listen, but listen in order to respond in love and wisdom. “Abba” is the word Jesus used in speaking to God, an Aramaic word which translates best into English “Daddy”. It is a word expressing intimacy; the God who is great and mighty is also near.

There is a wonderful story told about a Roman emperor who approaches the gates of the city in a grand triumphant procession and suddenly a child darted toward his chariot. A member of the praetorian guard seized the child and said, “Stay away! This is the Emperor!”

The child answered back, “He might be your emperor, but he is my father!” (6)

Jesus taught his followers to pray, “Father” not because God is exclusively masculine in nature, but because God is as close to us and as compassionate toward us as a loving parent would be. The Ultimate in the universe is listening for the sound of our voice.

When you pray, pray, “Our Father” not just “My Father”, because we remember that none of us stands alone. Pray “Our Mother” if you like.

The point is none of us, none of us stands alone. (7) We stand with others before the God who loves us and is waiting to be gracious to us.

When we say “Our Father in heaven” we are acknowledging the reality of God in all God’s majesty, and at the same time are resisting the temptation to reduce our idea of God to that of being something like our magical little mascot. “Our Father in heaven” reminds us of the words of the Psalmist, “When I consider your heaven, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, who are we that you should be mindful of us mortals that you care for us?” (Psalm 8)

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” Is it not the great tragedy of today that so few actually honor God’s name? Nothing is sacred. God is a buddy. God is a logo on a T-shirt. A cross is a fashion statement. The baby in the manger is an annual cash cow for the American retail industry, but that does not change the fact that God alone is holy, and that the name of God is to be treated with respect. It is to be honored and hallowed. Have you seen the movie *Children of Men*? It is a dark, brooding, brutal movie about the end of the world. The human race had come to the place where nothing was sacred. When nothing is sacred, anything goes.

We honor God’s name by being respectful of God, by being respectful of the life that God has created, by being respectful of ourselves, who bear God’s image. When we stop doing the things we ought not to do, and when we start doing the things that we really ought to do, we are honoring God’s name.

“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name.”

Can you pray that way? Are you ready to pray in reverence and in trust?

I close with this: A thoughtful man named Douglas Steere writes, “I heard a man being introduced at a banquet one night. The chairman said, ‘Mr. Weaver, we are ready to hear you. Are you ready, Mr. Weaver?’ When I gather myself for prayer, it is almost as if God is so addressing me, ‘Douglas Steere, I am ready to hear you. Are you ready to speak to me? I am ready to hear you. Are you ready to pray?’ And my answer is ‘Lord, you are always ready, but am I ever ready? Am I ever good

enough? O Lord, make me ready. Or at least, make me more ready to be made ready” (by your Holy Spirit) to pray, (8)  
*Our Father, who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Amen.*

- (1) As quoted by Philip Yancey in *Prayer*, Zondervan, 2006.
- (2) *The Lord’s Prayer for Today*, William J. Carl III, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. The title, as well as the inspiration for this series, comes from Dr. Carl’s fine new book on the Lord’s Prayer.
- (3) *The Good news According to Matthew*, Eduard Schweizer, John Know Press, 1975.
- (4) *NRSV* annotation.
- (5) *American Scholar*, March, 2006, Marilynne Robinson.
- (6) *A Christian Primer*, Albert C. Winn, Westminster John Knox, 1990.
- (7) Schweizer.
- (8) *Together in Solitude*, Douglas V. Steere.