

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
August 14, 2016
©2016

A Series on the Lord's Prayer I. – Who, Where, What?

Matthew 6:9-13 (King James version) "9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. 10 Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen."

In my thirty-plus years in ministry, I've probably attended worship at more than a hundred different Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregations. The thirteen years I spent as a Regional Minister or Associate Regional Minister accounts for that rather high number, since an important part of those jobs was visiting congregations on Sundays. Some of those congregations could be considered extremely theologically and politically liberal. Some would be thought of as extremely conservative. Most were somewhere in the middle. Those congregations ranged in size from a dozen in worship to several hundred. They were as diverse in their locations as the decaying downtown of Gary, Indiana, and country-road crossroads in the middle of Indiana cornfields. Worshipers at those congregations were of every race, ethnicity, and orientation. Most were conducted in English but I also have preached in congregations where my words were simultaneously translated into Korean or Spanish. Yet, even in the midst of all this incredible diversity – diversity that is a gift from God and a gift that we Disciples have to offer the wider culture that too often thinks that people must stay with "their own kind," fearful and suspicious of those who are "different" – there was one common element in every one of those worship services – the Lord's Prayer.

There is probably no more well-known Christian scripture than this one. One website I consulted had a listing of over 1400 translations of the Lord's Prayer into languages as obvious as English and French, and as obscure as Uspanteco, a language

spoken by 3000 people in an isolated mountain area of Guatemala. And, in our own congregation, it is the one single spoken thing that we do in worship that is exactly the same every single Sunday. The sermon may be good or forgettable, the attendance may be large or small, the songs and hymns ancient or contemporary, the Elders' prayers are always beautifully and distinctively crafted, but amidst all of that the single spoken thing that does not change is our saying the Lord's Prayer together. Year in and year out, even as other styles in our worship service have changed, it has remained familiar and consistent. But, of course, there can be some danger in familiarity. Familiarity can sometimes lead not just to comfort, but to complacency, to not really hearing the power and the meaning of this beloved prayer.

So, in this sermon series, that will take us up through Labor Day, I'd like us to hear the Lord's Prayer with fresh ears as we focus on the four sets of verses that the Lord's Prayer contains, beginning today with the very first verse and its three simple clauses: *"Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name."*

Our Father. There is a great deal of theology packed into these two little words. First, **"Our."** Grammar matters. And by the simple use of the *plural* form, Jesus reminds us and anyone who would follow Him that God is never the possession of one individual, never simply the God of one tribe, one nationality, one religion, one political or theological perspective. Moreover, the life of faith, Jesus is telling us with that pronoun, is always about **"us,"** it is always about more than just me, more than just you. That makes faith more challenging, but it makes faith better. After all, it would be easier if I never had to have my ideas about God challenged by other people's experiences. It would be more convenient if God were simply **"my"** father, **my** heavenly parent, whose job was to cater to my needs. Now, putting it like that, of course, sounds silly. None of us intends to treat God as if God were ours alone, or as if we were the only ones who had the real, true picture and understanding of God. But in this case, it's not our

intentions that get us into trouble; it's what happens inadvertently. My favorite quote from writer Ann Lamott, which I've shared with you more than once, speaks to this way we get in theological trouble: "*You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image,*" she says, "*when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.*"¹ Ouch. **That's** how you know you've made the move from "**our** Father" to "**my** father" – and that's when people get hurt. The life of faith is always to be struggled with, examined, celebrated in the midst of "us," in the midst of a **community** of folks – folks who make our thinking, our faith better, folks who challenge us when we need challenging, folks who won't let us slip into using God to justify our fears and our phobias. "**Our** Father." **Our** Father.

And what about that second word: "*Father.*" With this word, Jesus tells us perhaps the most crucial thing that there is to be said about God. After all, think about it: how do you get to be a father, whether literally or metaphorically, whether by biology or by choice? Well, you **create** something, you help give something life. What do I mean? Well, notice how Jesus **didn't** say to pray here in response to the question of "how should we pray." He doesn't say, "Pray like this: Our **coach**, our **partner**, our **best bud**, **our BFF.**" No, Jesus' very form of addressing God focuses on the fact that it is God who creates **life**. God is the father, the mother, the parent of every good and creative thing, every instance of riotous beauty, every example of bounty, every example of goodness. Throughout the Bible, what God does every and always is to create and sustain new life, new hope, new possibility; God is always a God of newness and hope and creativity. All of that is embodied and embedded in that simple choice of word "Father."

Another thing to note here is that in that use of the word, Jesus is saying that our

¹Ann Lamott, quoted in a number of places. Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Lamott

relationship with God is meant to be an *intimate* one. As one steeped in Judaism, Jesus learned that this phrase “Our Father” is also the same phrase that the rabbis had counseled for centuries because they knew that God was no distant, uncaring, impersonal deity, but was personal, loving, caring, involved. You will recall, perhaps, that elsewhere in the gospels Jesus is recorded as referring to God as “Abba.” That’s the Aramaic phrase – the language that Jesus spoke – that often gets translated as “father” but it’s really something else: the very best translation of the word into current American English is “Daddy.” In fact, it’s Jesus’ favorite word for God; he uses it 165 times in the gospels.² So, by the very way He tells us to address God, Jesus is telling us that God wants to have an intimate and personal relationship with all God’s children.

Now, this idea of God as “Father” is not to be taken literally. I’m not even sure what it would mean to say that God is “literally” a father. It is a metaphor meant to tell us something about God. And while Jesus here talks about God as Father there are other places where Jesus talks with other metaphors, some of them maternal. And throughout the Old Testament there is a consistent strain of imagery that talks about God as female. We may not be as familiar with those usages, perhaps, but they are there. And, contrary to what some folks would tell you, reminding ourselves of this isn’t so we can be politically correct somehow; no, it’s simply the recognition that God can be characterized by the best of what we know about **both** fathers and mothers. Sometimes, I can attest and I’ll bet most of you can too, you just want your mommy. And sometimes, you just want your daddy. And so **both** experiences can become moving and profound metaphors to describe the One who is the heavenly parent to us all.

But there is yet one more thing we must say here before moving on: there have been people, men and women both, who have felt themselves alienated from Church

²<http://bible.crosswalk.com/Dictionaries/BakersEvangelicalDictionary/bed.cgi?number=T254>

and from God because their experience of *their earthly* parents was too often hurtful or even abusive or possibly full of abandonment. What do we say to them? This formulation of Jesus' may leave them cold; Abba, Daddy, may not have good associations for them at all. Well, first, we say that no one will tell you how you **have to** pray, what image you **have to** use. Second, we can lament with them the absence of what should have been one of life's best things – a close, loving, intimate relationship with mother or father. And we can say to them that Jesus' use of the image of father – or mother – for God is intended to evoke the best, not remind folks of the worst. But, perhaps most importantly, to those folks scarred by the hurt or even abuse of earthly fathers or mothers, **we** can become as parents to them, mothers and father in the faith, and thereby seek to reclaim and rehabilitate for them what **should** have been a wonderful way of understanding God but wasn't.

Now for the second phrase: **Who art in heaven**. If the first two words of the prayer – “Our Father” – define and denote a God who is near, intimate, involved, personal, **this** phrase – “*Who art in heaven*” -- says something entirely different. The genius of this prayer is that in these two compact phrases lies the double truth of Christian faith: God is near, but God is also transcendent. And my friends, thank goodness for that! For you and I are limited. As we all know, even the best human relationships are imperfect and people in them hurt one another. Even the best of our commitment to justice for everyone gets muddied by our selfishness, our narrownesses, and sometimes the fact that we just plain get tired. My motives are never so pure as I sometimes pretend. And, my friends, if God is **only** near, if God is **only** part of this kind of nitty gritty life that we live, then God can't help us. But God is not just near, God is transcendent, “in heaven,” as the prayer puts it. Which is the best news I know, for it means that God's commitment to justice, to hope, to treating folks not simply as they deserve but as they might become is **perfect**. God doesn't get tired. God doesn't wear

out under the weight of the compromises of daily living. All of those things that you and I can be at **our** worst God never is. For God is transcendent, God is in heaven. And that's why you and I can hope. For unlike us, the transcendent, heavenly God won't grow weary, won't change the divine mind on a whim, won't have fits of selfishness disguised as principle.

And what of the final phrase: **"Hallowed be thy name."** *"Hallowed"* is not a word we use much in ordinary language. Moreover, the very construction of the sentence "Hallowed be thy name" just isn't the way we talk. After all, we say "I am hungry," not "Hungry be my name." But let me move to close this first sermon in this series with this thought: actually, both the word "hallowed" and the apparently odd construction "be thy name" is a signal of something important to us – and it is a way of summing up what the first two clauses are saying. For, remember, God is both near and far, both personal and transcendent, both intimate and overarching. And what Jesus is suggesting, I think, in the wording of this sentence "Hallowed be thy name" is this: you and I must always strive to talk about God in a way that does not dishonor God, that does not do violence to who God is, that does not attribute evil to God, that does not make God in our image. You might find it interesting to know that the American Bible Society's translation of this prayer into Hawaiian pidgin dialect actually captures the point beautifully. Instead of "hallowed be thy name," the pidgin translation has it: "we... give you plenny respect."³ We give you "plenny respect." This line of the prayer – "Hallowed by Thy name" – is actually expressing the hope that **we** will give God the respect that God deserves. And how do we do that? How do we "hallow" God's name, how do we give God "plenny respect"? Well, let me offer you just a few thoughts...

-- This week or maybe this month, somebody is going to tell a racist, or ethnic,

³<http://www.christusrex.org/www1/pater/JPN-hawaiian-creole.html>

- or misogynist, or homophobic joke in your presence. Will you laugh? That would not be to hallow God's name, that would be to "dis-respect" God.
- In the coming days or weeks someone will forward you something from the internet or post something on their Facebook page which says something vile or hurtful about someone with no evidence, something which calls into question the faith and Christian commitment of someone else, something that is not true but simply inflammatory. Will you pass it along or will you end the chain there? One way hallows and "respects" the God who made everyone and loves everyone; one doesn't.
 - Today, or this week, or next month someone is going to have an idea for a new way to do something, be on fire for that idea, be willing to put his or her heart and soul into it in the hopes that it can better show the love of God to new people in new ways. Will your first response be to be skeptical, suspicious or will you take joy and be encouraging? One way hallows and respects the God of creativity and one way does not.

Do you see what I'm getting at? More important, do you see what Jesus is getting at? We hallow God's name, God's very being, when we show our respect for God instead of our cynicism when we approach life and the people God has put in it with the presumption of good faith, with the presumption that God works in them too, with the belief that every single creature that God has made is worthy of respect and that, as one preacher famously put it, "God doesn't make any junk."

Hallowed be thy name. May it be so. May we help make it so. Amen.