



“This Prayer We Pray”

Text: Matthew 6:7-15

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February 3, 2019

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

One of the most effective ways we learn is by repetition. Watch a small child learning something new - how to stack blocks, how to walk, how to speak a word - and you'll see a study in repetition. Once a child learns how to put one block on top of another, they will do it all day. Once that first step is conquered, watch out! They're on the run! And once they learn to say that first word, be careful what you say. They manage to learn and repeat the least attractive portions of our vocabulary.

One of the ways we learn is by repeated doing. I can remember watching my grandmother make her raisin-filled cookies. There was nothing resembling a recipe. She didn't need it. She had made those cookies so many times that, if you woke her from a hard cold sleep, she could go right to the kitchen and make a perfect batch. In fact, even after we had her write down the recipe, all of our attempts to make those cookies, as she did, are dismal failures.

As a child of the church, I can't remember a time when I was not in Sunday morning worship. Part of that Sunday morning tradition was praying the prayer we call “The Lord's Prayer” with all the other members of the congregation. I didn't know it at first. It wasn't printed in the bulletin, even if I could have read it. I just listened. Bit by bit, I picked up a few words here-and-there. Eventually, with correction on a few phrases at home, I had the prayer memorized. It had a cadence - one that didn't interpret the words very well - but nevertheless was so distinct that when I went to my Roman Catholic grandparents' church and it came time for something called “The Pater Noster,” I could figure it out immediately:

Pater Noster, qui est in coeli, sanctificatur nomen tuum...
“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.” Same rhythm as the Presbyterians, only in Latin.

This prayer that we have - that Jesus gave us - is universal. There are few Christians anywhere in the world that don't know it. When I was in Jerusalem, and we had gathered in the Upper Room, we were told there was an upper, Upper Room - called the Pentecost Room. I was lucky enough to be one who got into the Pentecost Room. The guide asked all of us to join in praying "The Lord's Prayer" in our own language. And together, in languages from every land and continent, the prayer could be heard. Yes, some of us use the words "trespass" and "trespass against us." Some of us leave off the Apostolic Doxology - "for Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever." (We have Henry VIII and Elizabeth I to thank for that.) But it is a prayer that all Christians share in common.

On one of the first times we worshiped together with our friends from Temple Adath B'nai Israel, I thought I had covered all the bases in making the worship as inclusive as possible. Then I realized that "The Lord's Prayer" was still in the service as we approached it. I leaned over to Rabbi Mazo and said, "Gary, I'm sorry. I forgot to leave out the Lord's Prayer." His response was, "No need. It's a really Jewish prayer." And, after much consideration, Gary is right. It is, in some respects, a really good interfaith prayer.

The prayer begins as all prayers begin. It is addressed to God. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed (or holy) be Thy name." It immediately establishes the proper perspective and the proper relationship. "Our Father..." It's not about maleness or masculinity. We are not assigning God a specific gender. We are talking about a relationship. The formal word for "father" is not used in the Aramaic or the Greek. The word used is "abba" a more informal word that is closer to "dad" or "daddy" in English. The relationship, on which this prayer is based, is one of a loving parent and child.

Still, that familiarity is clarified with "hallowed be Thy name." God alone is holy. God alone is divine. God alone is God. We are not. We are not equals with God. Our name is not "hallowed" or "holy." But God's is and we confess that right from the start. We are addressing One who is not like us, but who loves us all the same.

"Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." That may be the scariest part of the prayer. There are tones of what some call "The Second Coming." There may be some of that there.

But it is more likely that it is a prayer that God's plan for the earth and its people and creatures take over from the plans we have for earth and its people and creatures. It is the acceptance that God's plan for the creation is true and lasting and still in force and that all too often our plans contradict and set us at odds with God. In every real and lasting way, we are praying that God will make earth the same as heaven, removing all the contradictions, all the boundaries, all the inconsistencies between our way and God's way.

We are giving God the authority that rightfully belongs to God and God alone. We are aligning ourselves with God and God's way of righteousness, justice, and peace. We are praying for the courage to say "no" to the ways of the world, and "yes" to the ways of God.

"Give us this day our daily bread." That may seem a funny part of the prayer. Most of us have bread and food for a couple of weeks in our pantries, fridges, and freezers.

But in Jesus' day, and in our own day, there are those who are uncertain about tomorrow's food. The most literal translation of this petition is, "Give us today our bread for the morrow." In Jesus' day and, sadly, in our own day, there were and are those who don't know from where tomorrow's bread will come.

If we fat and happy Christians of the first world are going to pray this petition with anything resembling sincerity and authenticity, we must learn to identify with the poor in our country and in the other countries of the world. It means learning to care for the neighbor who can't do anything for us. It means learning to share the bounty we have received with those who live in complete uncertainty about tomorrow.

And if that seems challenging, it only gets more demanding. "And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Let's cut to the chase. We are praying "And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

The God of the Bible is a God of forgiveness. We see that on page after page. God's nature is to forgive, to put our sins, faults, and failures behind us and to open a new door to a new beginning before us. If you read the Bible and miss that central point, you have failed. God's essential nature is love and in that perfect love there is complete and perfect forgiveness.

The trouble is when you start to think about these words: "Please God, forgive us - just like we have forgiven those who have sinned against us." "Forgive me, O God, as much as I have forgiven my worst enemy." Do you really want to pray that prayer? Are we willing to trade the complete forgiveness that God offers us, for the pitiable and partial forgiveness we offer to one another?"

This portion of the prayer about forgiveness is a seeking of God's grace *and* a commitment to extend that grace as freely and fully as God offers it to us. That may be the most challenging and difficult portion of the prayer.

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Let's be honest. We all face temptation. Just a couple of weeks ago, we were reminded that Jesus faced temptation. The Letter to the Hebrews assures us that we all face temptation. Temptation is a fact of life, for the person of faith.

And let's be equally clear: God does not lead us into temptation. God would not and cannot lead us onto a path that leads away from God.

This portion of the prayer is not unlike when Jesus was tempted and quoted portions of the Scripture to keep from succumbing to the words of the tempter. We are praying that when the time of temptation comes, God will be with us and that God will lead us out of that time, strengthening us in faith and trust in God. When we are tempted to dismiss the commandments, when we are enticed to abandon the way of Jesus, when we are beguiled by voices other than God's, be with us, O God, and help us stay faithful and true.

This is the prayer that Jesus gave us and it is the prayer we pray. It is but a handful of words. Yet it is a prayer that we can pray individually and collectively. It is a prayer we can pray word-for-word and it is a model for prayer that comes from within us. It's quite a prayer, this prayer we pray.

And it is a prayer we always pray when we come to this Table. It is a summary of our faith and life. It's focus on bread and forgiveness and accepting and embracing God's way encapsulates everything this Table is about and everything our life in Jesus Christ is about. It leads us to remember, this prayer we pray.

So, let us listen to the words. Let them sink in, down into the depths of our being from where it can recreate us and redirect us. For now and evermore. Amen.



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