

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“The Lord’s Prayer”

2011 Lent/Easter Sermon Series

A meditation by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, March 9, 2011, dedicated to Jesus, who not only taught to pray, but taught us to give, to live, to sacrifice, to love, to be just and to be kind to one another, and always to the glory of God, Abba!

“Our Father, Who Art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name”

Matthew 6:5a

(Part I of VIII in the sermon series

“The Lord’s Prayer”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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It begins with a simple request from the disciples of Jesus to their rabbi: *“Lord, teach us to pray.”* As Jesus answers them, he

offers 65 words that begin with “Our Father” and end with “Amen” or “so be it.” To this day, people of all faiths and no faith at all know this prayer as “The Lord’s Prayer.”

For almost 2,000 years, this prayer has guided billions of Christians from the earliest moments of life to embrace the fullness of faith. Across the globe at this hour in huts and hamlets; in cities and suburbs; in monasteries and mansions, in churches and in AA meetings, people are praying this prayer which varies slightly by faith traditions or choice of “Sins, Debts or trespasses,” and even by name, such as: “The Our Father,” “The Prayer of Our Savior,” “The Jesus Prayer,” or even “Pater Noster” (from the Latin).

No matter where in the world you are, one thing is constant and true: the Lord’s Prayer is the central prayer of our Christian faith.

When I asked my church school class last Sunday where they have prayed this prayer and how it has touched their lives, I heard stories of transformation and faith. At the birth of children, at bedsides of dying friends and family, in the depth of loneliness, in the joyful embrace of our savior’s love for them, in prisons across the globe, in 12-step meetings, in homeless shelters, on airplanes which appeared to be crash landing, in foreign lands in troubling circumstances, and in tough times that would try anyone’s soul, people found comfort, hope, purpose for living and salvation in this prayer. Perhaps most powerfully, one person witnessed to the immediacy and intimacy of this prayer for daily living. She said, *“When I most need God, I pray this prayer.”*

The Lord’s Prayer saved Larry Texler’s life. Larry was a member of Bethany UCC, my first congregation in Cleveland, Ohio. The first time I met him, I was struck a very noticeable and relatively fresh scar on his right temple. On first glance, it appeared

that he had recently had some sort of brain surgery, for the scar carried with it an indentation in his skull.

In time, Larry told me that he had been working the midnight shift in a convenience store when he was held up by an armed robber. When he was told to kneel and the gun was pointed at his head, the gunman said, "Beg for mercy." Larry held his hands in prayer, dropped his head and began, "Our Father, who art in heaven . . ." A shot rang out. When he came to, he was in the hospital. The doctor pronounced it was a miracle that he was alive, surviving a gunshot wound to the head. The angle of Larry's head had changed when he bowed to pray. Rather than killing him, the shot glanced the edge of his head.

Larry said, *"I was so scared. When he demanded I beg for mercy, I thought of Jesus. I thought, the only one to bow to is God. I need his mercy before I die. All of this happened in a split second. Jesus' prayer and our Father in Heaven saved my life."* This prayer saved one life. Is it possible that it has saved your life, too?

"Our Father in Heaven . . ." The prayer has a simple enough beginning. But, for the first hearers, the opening words were radical. First of all, the hearers of this prayer would have been confused by the use of "Father," which translates "Abba," which means "dearest Father," "papa" or "daddy" in the Aramaic. Closeness, intimacy and love, which one felt and expressed with one's "papa" was *not* the relationship one had with God. Quite frankly, such a personal, intimate relationship was unheard of in Judaism at the time. The disciples would have wondered what Jesus was talking about.

Second, the "fatherhood" or "parenthood" of God was quite common in early pagan or polytheistic cultures. Primitive people such as the pygmies, the Australian aborigines, or the Bantu in

Africa, along with highly developed peoples of antiquity such as the Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans and those of the Indus Valley all referred to gods as “father.” They did this to establish the god’s absolute power, their dependence on a god and unrestricted trust in their pantheon of gods. Was Jesus becoming pagan? Was he directing them toward Jupiter, Saturn, Zeus and away from the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel? What in the world was he doing and where was he taking them?

Perhaps the answer lies in the word “our.” Jesus has an intimate relationship with God. God is his birthright. He is born of the Father. He is the Promised One of Israel – “God with us” – Immanuel. He is true light from true light. His is of the very nature and essence of God. While God is the God **of** Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he is Jesus’ “dad.” Jesus is as close to God as life is to the one who breathes in and breathes out. He is the Incarnation.

By inviting the disciples into this relationship, he is inviting them into his home. He is meeting them at the door of life, if you will, and saying, “*Come in and meet my father.*” But, more importantly, he is saying, “*Come in and meet **our father.***” Because God is the father - or if you will, the parent of us all – Jesus is essentially saying, “***My father is your father is our father.***” The power of these two words at the beginning of this transformational prayer change the course of human interaction with God. Jesus is inviting all people into a personal, intimate, relationship with “his dad.” He wants everyone for time immemorial to know that God is here for them in very personal ways.

Let me say a word about “father” in this prayer. Some balk at speaking the name “father” when they pray or sing. I agree with folks most of the time. But in relation to the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus uses “father” to indicate intimacy and closeness to God. I would encourage you to use a word that draws you into intimacy and

closeness with God. It may be “parent” or “mother” or “God.” By what name are you drawn to love God more and more each day? Use that name. That is what really matters.

What does this ultimately mean? It means that your relationship with God is meant to be personal. You have been created – like Jesus was created – to be in close relationship with God. We are invited in. God is listening to each one of us. But it also means each one of us needs to be listening to God.

My friend Tony Campolo tells the story of praying to God is like a telephone conversation with God. You call him up and talk and talk and talk. You hang up and comment to others, “How am I supposed to know what God wants me to do? He never talks.” Then it dawns on you, I never listen to him. Listen to God. You will learn a lot.

After establishing closeness and intimacy in the relationship between “I and Thou,” as Martin Buber says, Jesus sets up some clear distance as well. God is near and yet far away. When Jesus says, **“Who art in heaven,”** he establishes yet another dimension to this relationship. Just as he establishes closeness with the “Our Father,” he clarifies the fathomless mystery that still emanates from God to humanity. Drawn in as daughters and sons of God, Jesus now points to the eternal nature of this God of ours. Our God is utterly and entirely unique. Our God has no rivals, no earthly kings or rulers to “lord over God.” Our God is by our side, yet dwelling on high. Our God is holding our hands, yet ruler of the universe. Our God is grace and glory. Our God is “right here, right now” and beyond time and human imagination.

A word on God’s holiness. God’s hallowedness, God’s holiness, defines the impeachable nature of God’s true love.

Hallowedness is the depth and reverence of God's love unmatched by anything that we can do.

Let me be clear. The path to God is not as easy as it might seem at first glance. The path can be rough and arduous and requires courage to follow. It requires faith, hope, and love and the vulnerability to confess our sins, to face our wrongdoings, and own them. As we are invited into the home of Jesus, the home of *our* father, we need to know there is a cost – as well as a joy – to this discipleship.

So, let the game-playing end and the relationship with “Abba” begin.

Not only is this prayer radical, but this prayer - if taken seriously - will lead us to a full and abundant life in Christ Jesus. We will come to know that *Our* Father loves us unconditionally. But we also will know that God points us back to his son as the way, the truth and the life. To follow him, to be in relationship with *his* dad, *his* parent, is costly. We may not wish to hear this, but we who have entered into this prayer, have already begun the journey.

I invite you to travel with me through this Lenten season and through the greatest prayer, the clearest prayer, the most joyful and costly prayer ever given to humanity. I invite you to journey into the heart of “The Lord's Prayer,” and by so doing, allow it to change your heart, mind and soul. Amen.

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio,

March 13, 2011, Lent 1, dedicated to our new members and their children who join today, to the BREAD Justice Ministry Network, to the people of Japan in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami, and always to the glory of God!

“ . . . Thy Kingdom Come . . . ”

Matthew 6:10

**(Part II of VIII in the sermon series
“The Lord’s Prayer”)**

On Ash Wednesday, we began a journey into the heart of The Lord’s Prayer. We explored the foundation of the prayer, its presence in our daily lives and the power of its opening words, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” Opening each word and phrase, we explored the mystery and power of our Savior’s prayer, which saves lives and helps us walk into the radical and real presence and purpose of God in our lives.

I did not fully explore “Hallowed be thy name.” Let me say that reverence and holiness is sadly missing in too much of what we do and say in our times.

Too many have come to confuse reverence with stuffy solemnity and stale spirituality. Reverence is made manifest when we show respect and love for all life (from the smallest fly to the greatest whale); when we cultivate special love and care for the human relationships that God has given us, and when we acknowledge God’s power and presence in one such as Jesus the Christ (and bow gracefully and graciously to God in thanksgiving to

God in Christ). While this doesn't fully explicate the depth of reverence to which we yield in God's name, it is a starting point for "hallowing God's name."

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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For the first Christians, The Lord's Prayer was a dangerous prayer. They stopped, knelt and placed their faces to the ground when whispering this prayer. They knew it could result in their death. They knew it was radical and anti-establishment. They knew that emperors and kings would slaughter them if they discovered it was being lifted up to God.

If you don't believe me, listen to one of the foremost New Testament scholars of the last century, German scholar Joachim Jeremias.

In his little book *The Prayers of Jesus*, published in English for the first time in 1967, Jeremias shared his findings on The Lord's Prayer. Having scoured thousands of prayers written and spoken over thousands of years, he proclaimed this startling truth: Nowhere in Judaism, until the words of Jesus, had God been addressed as "Abba" or "Father." Jesus did this all the time (as I shared last Wednesday).

Moreover, Jeremias revealed that The Lord's Prayer was not commonly prayed in regular worship during the early centuries of Christian faith. In the *Didache*, written in the first century, The Lord's Prayer is referred to as the "Holy treasure of the church." It was not taught to members until they understood its full implications and were able to grasp the awesome reverence needed to speak these words.

Cyril of Jerusalem speaks of its use in worship only in the portions of the service in which "the baptized" could speak, thus reserving its use for full members of the faith only. Candidates for baptism (adults only at this point), were instructed to learn The Lord's Prayer on Good Friday when the catechumens were in their last days of preparing for baptism at the Easter vigil, just as they prepared to be immersed in the waters of holiness. This remained so until 350 A.D.

Why all the secrecy and veil of separateness related to this prayer?

The answer may be found in the phrase before us today - "*Thy kingdom come . . .*" The biblical notion of "kingdom" has definite political overtones. The word for "kingdom" is "*basileia*," (which forms the word "basilica"). It can also be translated "empire." It would have political suicide for Jesus to teach his disciples to pray for the coming of a "new empire" given the hegemony of the Romans in his world. But that is exactly what he did! This prayer is tantamount to treason because this prayers' pray-ers were serving notice - out loud and in a not-so-subtle way - that the imperial reign of Caesar no longer held an ultimate claim on their lives.

With notice served, what was God's reign on earth going to look like and how was it going to get here?

In his book *The Lord's Prayer*, Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff posits that three main characteristics of the kingdom announced by Jesus must be kept in mind.

First, God's kingdom is universal. It embraces everything and everybody. It brings liberation to the infrastructures of society, such as sickness, poverty and death. It also restructures interpersonal relationships. They will be based on the absence of hatred and the plentitude of friendship and fellowship. And the relationship with God has changed as well. It is a loving (not a punitive) relationship between a father and his children. Jesus is clear throughout Matthew's Gospel that the kingdom can't be reduced to a certain segment of reality, whether that be political, religious or miraculous (Mt. 4:1-11).

Second, God's kingdom is structural. God's kingdom not only embraces everything and everyone, but it calls for a revolution in structure. God's kingdom brings total freedom. It is a kingdom of love and justice, not a kingdom like in the past for "just us." It is for "just everybody."

Third, God's kingdom is definitive. It will bring a new heaven and a new earth in which peace, justice and concord will reign between and among all God's children (Leonardo Boff, *The Lord's Prayer*, Orbis Press, Maryknoll, NY, 1983, pp. 58-59).

In other words, to spiritualize God's kingdom coming, doesn't get to the root of the totality of this message. God's coming reign changes everything, on earth and in heaven. Most radically, it is about the change of relationships. God's reign changes interpersonal relationships and well **as intra-and inter-** national

relationships. It means that we have to take each other seriously and embrace each other joyfully – including God.

It changes structures that take advantage of others, as opposed to building up relationships between them. God's kingdom coming balances life.

Now do see why “immature” Christians in the early days of our faith were not allowed to pray this prayer out loud at the start of their walk with Jesus?

Can we even come close to attaining the kingdom of God in our times? In any time? We can, if we return to the three characteristics mentioned above. We must begin with each other. We must build respect, equality and dignity – BREAD. To be builders of respect, equality and dignity, we have to begin by seeing one another as in need of prayer. St. Francis names this as “seeking to understand rather than to be understood.”

What is it that makes someone who they are and what they are? What brings out their core values in trying times?

As many of you know, I volunteer each week at Bluffsvue Elementary School in Worthington. This year, I have an often challenging third-grader with whom I work. He kicks, pinches, talks when he should be quite and is generally moving all the time. Quite frankly, he can be irritating sometimes. But this week, I saw a whole other side of him. As we were joined for our spelling test by one of his classmates, he told me about the tough times she was facing. As he talked, he reassured her I was okay. He told me how he stood by her when she was being bullied. I saw him as a good friend to someone being frightened and treated cruelly by others.

Whether he realized it, he was bringing in the kingdom value of justice, love and respect for his classmate by a friend when she needed one most of all. Although he was still fidgeting, now he was fidgeting for justice (and thus for Jesus). I liked what I saw.

How many of us fidget for justice (or for Jesus)? How many of us pray our Lord's Prayer in a radically inclusive way?

Perhaps, we can enter into a more powerful connection to God's coming kingdom through confession and OTHER prayers. It's the season of Lent – what better time to face our brokenness and start to bring in the kingdom of God?

The kingdom of God will begin to come to earth when we believe what Jesus was saying and act upon it. When we become bearers and bringers of justice through real and growing relationships with one another, the kingdom has a chance to come. If we pray to God for his kingdom to come and then we fidget for justice, the tide may turn. "Thy kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven." Amen.

I shared this prayer in the early service.

On any given day, I find myself reading Children's Defense Fund founder, Marian Wright Edlemann's little book, *Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations of Loving and Working for Children*. One prayer asks for God's forgiveness.

O God, forgive our rich nation where small babies die of cold quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation where small children suffer from hunger quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation where toddlers and school children die from guns and sold quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation that let's children be the poorest group of citizens quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation that let's the rich continue to get more at the expense of the poor quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation which thinks security rests in missiles rather than mothers and in bombs rather than babies.

O God, forgive our rich nation for not giving you sufficient thanks by giving to others their daily bread.

O God, help us never to confuse what is legal with what is just and right in your sight. (*Guide My Feet*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1995, p. 88).

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson at First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, March 20, 2011, dedicated to Franklin Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Ky., and the Rev. Katie Ann Strednak, for their shared commitment to seek the will of God instead of listening to the voice of fear; and for their tenacity in participating in building up the body of Christ as they learn, teach and bless Franklin and beyond.

**“Thy will be Done on Earth as
it is in Heaven”**

Matthew 6:10b

***(Part III of VIII in the sermon series
“The Lord’s Prayer”)***

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Let us pray. God with us always, we call for you and discover you are already here patiently waiting. We come seeking your guidance for this hour and this day; awaiting your vision for our lives and for humanity. May your will be accomplished this day, even through us, even through me; and may the words of my mouth and the mediation of all our hearts be acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

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Here we are – week three and we’re off to a rolling good start on The Lord’s Prayer. If you’ve been away, your best bet is to stop by the church office or go on-line and pick up all of Reverend Tim’s sermons. In the meantime, since we are now midway, I’ll share some highly abbreviated notes:

The Lord’s Prayer – has other names including: the Jesus prayer and the Our Father prayer. Emmet Fox called it the Great Prayer, telling his audiences it is a “compact formula for the development of the soul.”ⁱ In this 2,000-year-old model, Jesus teaches us how to pray together as one body. Up on the Mount, just before teaching it he cautions us not to pray for show, as if we were on stage over at Capital Theatre. I raise this up to us in part because we have added a couple of elements to our worship for Lent – the Lord’s Prayer in different versions, varied musical interpretations, and during worship, it is signed as the whole or in parts through an interpreter. Our hope is to facilitate a depth of soul, not depth of show.

The opening of the prayer is unmistakable: **“Our Father, who art in heaven.”** Not just my father or yours alone, but remarkably and radically, the father of Jesus is proclaimed in this prayer as our father, too. Some of those sitting cross-legged on the hillside would have heard it as blasphemy – way too personal, offensive and even dangerous. Others might have thought they heard him wrong;

maybe his words were distorted in the wind. I'm not alone when I wonder if it was a mix of what happened. Perhaps some were startled, while others had to let it sink in the way Lincoln's address at Gettysburg had to settle in years after it was delivered before it gained its reputation?ⁱⁱ Either way it has far surpassed the test of time. It has shaped worship of God around the world. In essence we are praying, "Come listen to us, Daddy."

And yet, we know the gap between us and God is not always bridged by this parental image. It can also be a place of stumbling if your parents were not able to express love in healthy ways. Even so, it is offered as a way to know "God on high" or is also "God near by," with us, approachable, ready and desiring for us to communicate. Immediately at Jesus' invitation, we are all in this prayer together.

". . . Hallowed be Thy name" – We don't use the word hallowed very often, do we? My grandmother in her earlier days might well have gone after, or at least threatened, to go after the likes of Bart Simpson with a bar of soap. She would not have approved of using God's name in unholy, unhallowed ways. What young Bart has missed is that it's not just a name of our creator that is lost in his recklessness; it is also his own unique place in the greater scheme of life. God is God and thankfully, we are not. Furthermore, once we proclaim God is holy, is hallowed, we assume a different posture in our life, even physically. We kneel, we stand in line, we reach up, we watch, we wait; we look out across the vista and know we are but tiny bits of particle in the vast universe. And yet, God calls us to talk, listen and be loved. God calls us to work together in redeeming the world. On the days we have any sense we are humbled and amazed. Which brings us to the core of the prayer for this morning:

". . . Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Last week in our Sunday morning class, we talked about where we might catch glimpses of the kingdom of heaven, or the reign of God on earth – we referred to them as "spot kingdoms."

Examples included Faith Mission and Good Samaritan [and the Italian Children's Home] and *everywhere people are fed and are cared for in personal ways*. The kingdom is also *where uprisings are replaced by peace and where fear is replaced by safety*. It is the *Great Reversal*. It does not look like *earthly politics where power is over another person or domination over the weak*. Only God is in first place. Furthermore, God's kingdom or reign is not only for some later time, it is both now and coming. It is worth our seeking.

I used to live straight across the river from Cape Canaveral and the Kennedy Space Center. I would stand in our front yard and watch liftoff of rockets and shuttles. (When they launch at night it is amazing – the whole sky turns red for an instant!) Because of this, one particular “spot kingdom” mentioned in class really caught my attention. It reminded me that the kingdom or reign of God does not only happen in a three-tiered universe and come down to us, the way we sing of highest heaven in some of our beloved hymns. It can begin on earth and sent skyward. God's reign may be seen when nations unite, plan and participate in the science and technology of satellites, telescopes, and most particularly this month, the International Space Station. God is not limited by time or space.

In spite of many signs, there may be moments in life when we have trouble seeing or experiencing the reign of God. For such moments, theologian Jurgen Moltmann challenges us to notice: “The church [is] the source of continual new impulses toward the realization of righteousness, freedom here, and in the light of the promised future that is to come.”ⁱⁱⁱ It may be when we do not see or do not yet know of the kingdom that we, the church, have slowed down or stopped generating new impulses toward the reign of God now and coming. Or, it may be we quit looking for it. At other times it may be we choose not to participate. And sometimes it may be hidden for while behind circumstance or even fear.

“ . . . Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth . . . ”

We pray for God's will to be done, but to some, that can sound terrifying, especially if you think the will of God includes atrocities. So often we hear the phrase, “It was the will of God,” as a way to

describe all kinds of things that don't fit together with the character of our loving God.

For instance, when someone becomes terribly ill, or a terrorist strikes, or one car crashes into another; or an earthquake tosses the planet several degrees off its axis and then a tsunami washes up with jet speed. Are these really the will of God? It is not uncommon for people to give God all the credit for such horrible things, as if it somehow reduces the pain or explains the events. John Spong reminds us, "We blame God for so much!"^{iv} Placing the blame on God may grant us an open window to help us catch our breath in the moment (and that can be really helpful) but then thankfully down the road God can help us to consider other options. When things happen that do not match the character of God, we may want to move beyond attributing everything to God.

I learned this in part through one of my saints. He was a middle-aged man by the name of Bill. He lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I selfishly saved him for the last visit of every hospital visitation day. I was blessed as our friendship grew. Both he and his wife were upbeat and gentle of spirit – Bill in particular had a deep and abiding sense of joy. At the same time, he knew illness was terminal. He had known that long before we met. He was direct and honest with feelings as they came and went, but there was one he struggled with for a long time - it was connected to the death of his daughter. She had suffered a violent death, murdered the year before, and early on he angrily wanted to know, "How does that fit into the will of God?" As his pastor, all I could do at first was be with him in the outrage, sadness and despair. Later, with some help from Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, we learned a little more together about a broader understanding of the will of God – that there is a difference between God's ultimate will and the immense variety of things that get in the way of it.

We were reminded that Jesus went so far as to tell us that some things are unmistakably not God's will.^v Through the gospel of Matthew we hear him tell us, "*So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost*" (Mt 18:14) and in Second Peter we are assured that God "*is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.*" (2 Peter 3:9) It

requires us to take on the curiosity and courage of Nicodemus and the obedience of Abram to notice God's will and the life of Jesus to know more. In him, we see a continuum of God's will.

It was God's hope and desire, God's intention, that everyone would make the best choice and follow Jesus. This hope continues today for all of us as well. It is God's desire for us to choose God and follow the way of the Christ. At the same time we participate in the gift of free will, sometimes referred to as the permissive will of God. God did not desire the people to turn against Jesus; however we are given our own freedom. We are not just chess pieces moving around on a giant chess board at the hand of God, and yet the choice of the people does not get the final word in the death of Jesus.

In spite of their sin, God still pursued the ultimate hope and will. Even though the crowd and the leaders chose this horrible option for the Christ, death would not win. It was overturned. Not only that - in the process of facing such horrific experiences of betrayal and torture a new level of forgiveness and loving ones enemy was made visible. Jesus raised the bar on forgiveness. Jesus raised the bar on loving one's enemy. Jesus loved and loves, more completely than any other.

God's will, God's hope, is the redemption of all humanity. *"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."* (Romans 8:28) We can trust in the divine character and hope of God.

God wants the best for us; wills the best for us. God calls us to life. In fact, *God calls us to abundant life!* But God's will does not always happen fast - it takes all of history. It is not completed instantly - God embraces and corrects us one step at a time. And our own free will gets in the way as we resist over and over again.

We will make mistakes; some of them will be huge. And when we fall, you and I can trust that "Thy will be done" means God will provide; God will show us the way and help us through it. God

knows us far better than we know ourselves and loves us . . . and when need be, God loves us still, in spite of our choices.

The good news of this day is that God can, and will, redeem and transform us in the process. Even though horrible things beyond our own control also may occur, they are not the end. Every single day we are invited and encouraged in the name of God to participate in the saving actions that can happen when there is need of healing, justice, freedom, restoration and transformation of the people of God and all of creation.

Above everything else, this petition in the Lord's Prayer is one of great hope, because we can trust that God's kingdom *will* come, it is already on the way; it is already in you.

i Emmet Fox, *The Sermon on the Mount* (New York; Harper and Brothers, 1934), p.161.

ii William J. Carl III, *The Lord's Prayer for Today* (Louisville; Westminster John Know Press, 2006) p.5.

iii Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Grounds and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p.22.

iv John Shelby Spong, *Honest Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 61.

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 3, March 27, 2011, dedicated to the memory of Chalmers Coe on the fifth anniversary of his death, to Dick Schwabe at this time of his death, to all who loved him, and always to the glory of God!

***“Give Us This Day
Our Daily Bread”***

Matthew 6:11
(Part IV of VIII in the sermon series
“The Lord’s Prayer”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

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Abraham Maslow was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1908, the oldest of seven children. His parents were uneducated Jews who had immigrated from the Ukraine. He described himself as a slow and tidy child. He remembered his childhood as lonely and rather unhappy, because, as he said, *"I was the little Jewish boy in the non-Jewish neighborhood. It was a little like being the first Negro enrolled in the all-white school. I was isolated and unhappy. I grew up in libraries and among books."* He would pursue law, but he went to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin to study psychology. He returned to New York with his doctorate and there he spent most of his lifetime developing his new discipline, called "Humanistic Psychology."

Maslow revolutionized the study of human behavior and the mind with one simple belief. *He believed every person has a strong desire to reach and realize his or her full human potential.* Each of us has a deep desire to reach a level of "self-actualization." To prove

that humans are not simply blindly reacting to situations, but trying to accomplish something greater, Maslow studied mentally healthy individuals instead of people with serious psychological issues. As he once said, *“Dr Freud has supplied us with the ‘sick half’ of psychology, now we must fill it out with the healthy half.”*

Studying healthy people informed his theory that people experience “peak experiences,” high points in life when the individual is in harmony with himself and his surroundings. In Maslow's view, self-actualized people can have many peak experiences throughout a day while others have those experiences less frequently. Self-actualized persons are “reality-centered” and have a great ability to differentiate between what is fraudulent and what is genuine. They are also “problem centered,” meaning they can treat life's challenges as problems that demand solutions. Jesus of Nazareth, Albert Einstein and Lao Tzu, the father of Taoism, were three such people that Maslow studied.

To demonstrate the ascendancy of his theory, Dr. Maslow created a visual aid that he called the **Hierarchy of Needs**. It is a pyramid depicting the levels of human needs, psychological and physical. When a human being ascends the steps of the pyramid, he reaches self-actualization. At the bottom of the pyramid are the **“Basic needs or Physiological Needs”** of a human being, food and water and sex. The next level is **“Safety Needs: Security, Order, and Stability.”** These two steps are important to the physical survival of the person. Once individuals have basic nutrition, shelter and safety, they attempt to accomplish more.

The third level of need is **“Love and Belonging,”** which are psychological needs; when individuals have taken care of themselves physically, they are ready to share themselves with others. The fourth level is achieved when individuals feel comfortable with what they have accomplished. This is the **“Esteem Level,”** the level of success and status (from self and others). The

top of the pyramid, **“Need for Self-actualization,”** occurs when individuals reach a state of harmony and understanding. (*The Developing Person Through the Life Span*, 1983, pg. 44).

Clearly, without meeting basic needs and safety needs, one cannot ascend to love and belonging, to esteem and ultimately to self-actualizing needs. And this where Maslow theories meet the Lord’s Prayer.

Last week, as our class explored the phrase **“give us this day our daily bread,”** a self-actualized, oldest of seven, first century Jewish Peasant of Nazareth named Jesus encountered a self-actualized oldest of seven 20th-century Jewish immigrant’s child from Brooklyn named Abraham. Without daily bread, without meeting basic human needs, no one can reach the peak experiences to which Jesus calls us in our encounters with God and one another. Jesus knew this as he taught his disciples to pray to “our father” in heaven.

Today, the challenge to recite this petition is ever-growing in a world in which hunger grows and bread is too unevenly distributed.

In America alone, we are seeing an ever-increasing cry for daily bread. With 43.6 million Americans living below the poverty level, our national census statistics indicate that over 23 million households in America are “food insecure.” What this means is that someone in this home will be challenged to find daily bread over the next 24 hours. Considering that we are “the bread basket” for the world, how is it looking for the billions of others occupying the planet with us? It is bleak to say the least.

Indian theologian, Musa W. Dube Shomanah, speaking from one of the world's most impoverished countries writes to his fellow Christians:

*To pray for daily bread is thus a simple but clear reminder to all. Christians that is it God's will that there be food for all but that food is not readily available to all on a daily basis. Praying for daily bread confronts those with refrigerators, storerooms and supermarkets stuffed with food with this question: Why do I not feel the urgency to pray for daily bread while some homeless, some jobless, and even some hard-working persons have nothing to put on their plates and that of their children? The Lord's Prayer challenges all who eat, store or throw away food to be producers and givers of daily bread. (From Michael Crosby, *The Prayer that Jesus Taught Us*, Maryknoll Press, Maryknoll, NY, 2002, p. 119)*

But, let's bring this home a bit more clearly. We have members and friends of our congregation who can say this day that they don't know from what source today's daily bread will be coming. When asked last Sunday if people had ever experienced a day without bread for the journey, one member said, "*On Friday (two days earlier), I was down to my last half cup of rice. I was paid that day and was able to go grocery shopping.*" Daily bread is not a given - even in our congregation.

What was Jesus saying when he offered this prayer? The Aramaic word for "bread" is *lachma*, which has multiple meanings. It means both "food" (not bread alone) and "understanding." In his book *Prayers of the Cosmos*, Neil Douglas-Klotz writes, "The root of this word comes from the divine feminine - HMA - which pictures growing, vigor, warmth, passion, possibility and all the instruments of generative power. In Proverbs we see this word as 'Holy Wisdom.'" (p. 27) So, "bread" is food and understanding. To use Maslow's hierarchy of needs, "bread" in this context fills both a physiological and spiritual or self-actualizing need.

In addition, the word for “daily” is *epiousios*, which also is interesting. *Epi* means “that which belongs to someone.” *Ousios* means “that which is essential.” So “daily” translates to “that which is essential that belongs to someone.”

“Daily bread” for Jesus would have been food of essence, plus the food of understanding and the food of belonging. For all of us to provide daily bread is more than putting food on the table, so to speak. It harkens more to Maslow’s understanding of self-actualization. For all of us, daily bread feeds our bodies, minds and souls. It is the sustenance that provides so much more than food. It is about community. It is about solidarity. It is about our connection to one another and the center of God.

“Give us this day our daily bread” is the turning point of the Lord’s Prayer. The first part was directed toward heaven, the divine reality of God, the intimate relationship with the parent, “Our Father,” and the ultimate coming of God’s kingdom and God’s will being done. Now, in the second part of the prayer, our gaze is turned toward earth and humankind and its needs. Bread is necessary for life and understanding one another. It provides us with strength to forgive the disruptions and divisions in the human community and our fellowship and provides strength as well against temptation and deliverance from evil.

In this turning point of the Lord’s Prayer we see no mysticizing or spiritualizing. We see human life in concrete, biological, social and historical contexts faced and dealt with. Jesus was like that! He faced reality and dealt with it. When he was teaching by the Sea of Galilee and the time came for people to eat, he consulted his disciples. Seeing the people were hungry he asked what should be done. The disciples said, “Send them away.” Jesus double checked - send away the 5,000? “No” he said. The correct answer was to feed them. Even today, Jesus’ disciples too often hear the knock of the hungry poor at their door and send them away. A friend said to

me this week, our greatest challenge in Ohio today is the creeping poverty and hunger everywhere around us. Jesus would have none of that if he were here!

Jesus works for the miracle – feeding those around him in need! The miracle of feeding 5,000 hungry students on the hillsides of the north shore of the lake was one of distributive justice. Jesus called upon his followers to share what they had. They did so. When the meal was over, baskets of food were left.

For Jesus it is never *just* about food. It is always about *just* food.

How do we share what we have? When do we share what we have? With whom do we share what we have? Why do we share what we have? These are the questions which drive our Jesus to open and close each day and each encounter with prayer. Life lived out of prayer is always life lived in love and justice.

When Jesus took bread, blessed bread, broke bread and gave bread, this four-fold action was more than eucharistic. Ultimately, it was more than a memorial feast for his disciples. It was more than the distribution of food by the seaside. It was distributive justice. It was the eucharist as God's justice coming to earth!

Taking, blessing, breaking, giving was the action for life itself. When we take our lives each day, present them to God as a blessing, sacrifice ourselves for our families, for our brothers and sisters in need, and then give completely of ourselves to others, we have crossed the threshold of earth and heaven. In the words of Celtic spirituality, we have traversed the “thin space” between here and now and eternity.

Jesus knew this. He knows it still. Let us work together with one another, in the name of Jesus, to “give daily bread” and know that God is all about taking, blessing, breaking and giving in making us complete and beautiful human beings. It is God’s will after all. Amen.

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 4, April 3, 2011, dedicated to all who struggle to forgive.

**“And Forgive Us Our Debts, as
We Also Have Forgiven
Our Debtors”**

Matthew 6:12
(Part V in the sermon series
“The Lord’s Prayer”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

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It seems to me we have a couple of pesky things to get off our table before we can comfortably prop up our elbows and discuss this impossible possibility called forgiveness.

Let's start with the lightest and probably the most commonly asked question – which is correct – forgive us our debts, our trespasses or our sin? Are you one who wonders about the difference? Here's a very brief explanation. Long ago and far away, which word was prayed depended on where someone lived and under whose rule they lived. Nowadays it usually depends on what church we were attending when we learned the prayer. The liturgy of the Anglicans, United Methodist and Episcopalians a some who based their early prayer on the Common Book of Prayer and/or the 16th century Tyndale Bible. Tyndale used both the Greek and Hebrew texts. Then, in 1611 some 64 or so scholars created the King James Bible, using about 3/4th of the Tyndale Bible. The word we say differently in our prayer is one of the words that drew from different, but related words, when they were translated. And as a result we now have both trespasses and debts. In addition, one newer translation reunites them as “sin.”

If you enjoy history it's also easy to get swept away on underlying images of debts, trespasses and sins. The studies will carry you to the far reaches of early culture, scripture and the relationship of interest, pledges, debt and slavery that go back to Egyptian taskmasters, Cyrus the Great, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, Matthew Mark and Luke as starters. We could spend a month of Sundays on it, but in truth it would only be a distraction from the real point – which is forgiveness. Call the problem by whatever name you prefer, the struggle is forgiveness.

Matthew sets it down in front of us like bread on the table.

“Lord if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”
Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but I tell you seventy times seven times.’ (Mt 18:21-27)

So with a show of hands then, how many of us are in favor of forgiveness? It's amazing how much we agree with it in theory and how challenging it can be to let it work in us and through us. If you and I are at odds with each other, which of us will go first in forgiving the other? Who will flinch first? Sometimes we sound like Mikey's big brother at the breakfast table – trying to get little Mikey to taste Life Cereal – taunting him to go first – 'Try it Mikey – you'll like it!'

Other times time we step into the shoes of the older brother who watches his sibling coming up the garden path, seeming to think – "something wicked this way comes." (Ray Bradbury) We see him rehearsing the speech we know he's going to drop on Dad running toward him. We just *know* he is going to be forgiven....yep, there it is – the arms wide, the embrace strong, the tears flowing; son and father unite. Forgiveness can be sweet, but it can also have a harsh sting! We are all in favor of forgiveness, but we do not always want to see everyone forgiven.

It is hard to grasp that it is God's joy to set us free and forgiveness sets us free. It is God's desire to give us life abundant. We know God can forgive because God is God, but this human forgiveness is another thing! In the blink of an eye forgiveness gets tangled up like spaghetti with issues of power, rage, righteousness, justice – usually our version of justice, not the God-kind.

Not only that, it doesn't take long to learn that when we withhold forgiveness it can seem that we are keeping our self safe. It is not hard to convince ourselves that withholding forgiveness prevents someone else from hurting us again; and as an added bonus, it seems like it can keep us from having to deal a second or third or fourth time, with shame. And, few are disappointed when they realize that not offering forgiveness just might make the other person squirm a little longer. Forgiveness is tricky business. We are all in favor of forgiveness, but we do not always want to go first; sometimes we don't want to go at all.

The truth is, even if we finally get the words out and say, “I forgive you” or “God, please forgive me”, things don’t magically get better. We humans are not nearly as forgiving as our dogs and cats. We cling to our wounds. Sometimes we like it that way.

How many have heard or said, “I can forgive you, but I will never forget?” It almost always leads us to troubled water. Especially if we say it laced with anger. Now let me be clear, when it comes to genuine forgiveness, there rests within it a healthy reminder of our past and a future hope of reconciliation. Forgetting does not mean jumping back into danger. Healing and changes usually take some time, but we need not let that stop us. We do not need to be alone in the process. God, counselors, pastors and friends can help us on the journey of learning new healthy ways to relate to each other. At the same time, if we do not let go and forgive wholeheartedly we punish our own self. Lingering bitterness and hatred wreaks havoc on our health. The cycle is not pretty.

Unhealthy stress diverts the flow of essential minerals and vitamins headed to our immune system. Will Carl, president of Pittsburg Seminary gives us perspective when he asks, “Wouldn’t it be nice if anger and resentment and the inability to forgive would consume fat cells instead of vitamins and minerals? If that were the way things worked, we would all be trim and fit.”^{vi}

Unfortunately it doesn’t work that way. Withholding forgiveness blocks healthy relationships; interferes with healthy bodies and interferes with healthy minds. It impedes God’s gift of life abundant. It arm wrestles with our salvation – our peace, wholeness, health and shalom. God tells us to forgive so we may know salvation now and coming.

Imagine how steamed Moses must have been – he worked day and night leading his rag-tag group across the wilderness. He listened to them cheer when they were saved. He listened to them complain about a boring diet. He led the grumblers over one sand dune and up the next. Then one day, he left his brother Aaron in charge and went up the mount to listen to God. God gave him a heads up that there was mischief below, so Moses headed back to

the people. Did he see them praising God for keeping them safe and fed as he descended? No, he saw they melted down the family heirlooms and created a new idol to replace God! A revolt against God took place where thanks were due. Moses must have been seething...and yet, he turned to God in prayer seeking forgiveness for everyone. How could he?

Do you also remember the gunman one who killed the innocent children in the Amish school a few years ago? It must have really frustrated some of the reporters that day. They did their best to get someone to condemn the gunman. Instead, the parents and the community simply said, "We forgive him." I don't know how many of us could do that, but I know their story, their witness as forgiving hearts, continue to teach us about God's promise and God's hope.

God tells us to forgive so you and I may receive the peace of God which surpasses all understanding - the salvation of the world - the gift of God's own beloved. The one who tells us, "And lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Mt 28:20)

I've asked Mark and some helpers to lead us again this morning. Have you signed this part of the prayer yet with an interpreter? While they are coming forward, I'll get you started with the way I was taught. Open both hands palm up. Now raise your middle finger on one hand and touch it to the center of the other open palm; then brush all your fingers across the palm toward you a couple times and then away in the same manner; as if you were gently strumming a guitar . . . "Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us" just like Jesus did for us when the nails pierced his hands or wrists . . . for you, for me, for all of us.

No wonder we are reticent to extend forgiveness. It can be risky business, especially as we pray, "Forgive me God, the way I am forgiving others." May all our prayers and our lives, affirm and celebrate the unlimited, unmerited, amazing grace of God, amen.

¹ William J. Carl III, *The Lord's Prayer for Today* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2006), 65.

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 5, April 10, 2011, dedicated to Jane Werum on her birthday, to David and Martha Loy as they established a new home this week, and always to the glory of God!

**“Lead Us Not
Into Temptation” ***

**Matthew 6:13a
(Part VI of VIII in the sermon series
“The Lord’s Prayer”)**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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“Lead us **not** into temptation.” The Lord’s Prayer appeals to our God. This word “temptation” is often lost to us. Neil Douglas-Klotz in his book *Prayers of the Cosmos*, translates the prayer from the Aramaic, the original language of Jesus. “Lead us not into temptation translates: *“Don’t let us enter into . . . that which diverts us from the inner purpose of our lives.”* In the Greek, the word “temptation” translates “test.” So temptation is not so much about getting caught up in evil as it is about having our strength and resolve being tested. Often, we hear, *“Lead us not into this time of testing.”*

We have come to a great and uplifting truth. What we call temptation is not meant to make us sin. It is not designed to make us fall. Temptation is designed to help us conquer sin and make us stronger and better women and men. Temptation is not designed to make us bad, but it designed to make us good. It is not meant to weaken us, but through the ordeals and challenges of life’s temptations, we emerge stronger, and finer and purer. We may fail in the test, but we are meant to. It is not so much the penalty of being human, but the glory - or manifestation - of being human.

Here we pause and ponder temptation’s way. From where does temptation our “testing” come?

Sometimes temptation comes from outside ourselves. We choose to take up with those whose behaviors and actions bring us no gain. They influence us in ways that lead us into mischief. They lead us into trouble we were not into before. We find

ourselves tripping down an alley instead an avenue, where shadows prevail and light dims mightily. These tempters can take many different forms and characterizations. But, their influence cuts against the right we know within us. Often in a haze, we stumble. Often in the darkest night we fall. *Sometimes our testing comes OUTSIDE ourselves.*

Other times temptation comes from those who love us. Of all the temptations this is the hardest to fight. While the first temptation comes through shadows and mischief, this temptation has the appearance of not meaning to harm us in the slightest way. You may feel called to a certain place or certain vocation or career. But to follow that path may mean abandoning the successes the world names for you and your loved ones want for themselves - and maybe for you. To follow that path may be unpopular with your family and friends. Family counsels, cautions, dissuades you from the path to which you feel called. They want you to do well in a worldly sense, but sometime divine is stirring inside of you. “Stay with us,” your loved ones beckon. But in time, you find the light inside you dying, because you have listened to the tempting voices close at hand. *Temptation can come from those closest to us.*

Temptation comes so often to the young. As young men and women, we do not want to appear “holy” or “pious” or “better than others.” So, we skip church, reject the values which have formed the core of our being, flea from what we know to be good and seek company with what our parents and loved ones feel is not so good. We would rather be seen as daring, as adventurous and “bad” than as good and pure.

Not so saintly in his younger years, (known as a playboy by 4th century terms) Augustine of Hippo (now Algeria) wrote of his youthful endeavors in his famous book *Confessions*. By the time we get know him, he is a saint! St. Augustine writes:

Among my equals I was ashamed of being less shameless than others, when I heard them boast of their wickedness . . . And I took pleasure not only in the pleasure of the deed but in the praise . . . I made myself worse than I was that I might not be reproached. And when in anything I had not sinned as the most abandoned ones, I would say that I had done what I had not done, that I might not seem contemptible.

Later, Augustine would admit that one of the greatest defenses against temptation is simply the courage to be good. *Temptation can come to the young.*

Temptation can also come from inside ourselves. If nothing inside of us could respond to temptation's appeal, temptation would be helpless to defeat us. In every one of us there is a weak spot. Each one of our points of vulnerability differs. What might tempt one person leaves the person beside him or her completely unmoved or unaffected. Two people enter a casino with the same amount of cash. One spends it, loses it and stops. The other spends it, loses it and goes to the money machine, the bank or some lending operation for more to spend and lose and cannot stop. It is not the casino itself that causes temptation, but the trigger for gambling inside the heart and mind of one person is different than that in the heart and mind of another. In every person, the "Achilles heal," or the weak spot, is tempter's delight. Whatever the flaw, the fault of passion, the instinct, the quirk, the trigger, the challenge is to be aware and on guard and on watch to keep it in check.

Like our fingerprints, each of us has a distinctive draw toward some temptation. For one person this may be a dream of glory, a lust or a craving that carries a person beyond himself or herself. For another, this trigger in the heart and mind may be a temptation to never reach or stretch or try for something higher or further beyond what is safe.

Carl Jung referred to the “other side of self” as the “shadow.” In Jungian psychology, the **shadow** or **shadow aspect** is a part of the unconscious mind consisting of repressed weaknesses, shortcomings, and instincts. Jung wrote, “Everyone carries a shadow and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is.”

According to Jung, the shadow, in being instinctive and irrational, is prone to projection. That is, we turn a personal inferiority into a perceived moral deficiency or flaw in someone else. Jung wrote that if these projections are unrecognized, “the projection-making factor then has a free hand and can realize its object – if it has one – or bring about some other situation characteristic of its power.” When we are tempted into projections on others, these projections insulate and cripple us by forming an ever thicker fog of illusion between our egos and the real world (drawn from Wikipedia on Carl Jung and *The Shadow*.)

In other words, what we struggle with in ourselves we can project onto the other as wrong in them, when in fact, it is our issue, our struggle, our challenge. The temptation is still inside us, but it shows itself outside our self. *Temptation can come from within us.*

If temptation doesn't come from outside ourselves, from those close to us, when we are young or from inside ourselves at our most vulnerable point, **we can find ourselves tempted at our strongest points**, which is the paradox of temptation. History is full of examples of castles that fell because no guard was placed at the strongest section of the wall. They didn't think it necessary. What is your strongest point? Temptation may slip right past it. Be on guard.

Temptation is something we ask God to lead us out of and away from every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. It is there for us in every imaginable way in every day. Perhaps we would do well to simply learn a few defenses against its inevitable presence in our lives.

First, learn to love and respect yourself. Learn to say "no" to things that tear you down and "yes" to things that build you up. It sounds so simple. And maybe it is. Time and time again in the scriptures when Jesus is faced with the Tempter, the Devil (you know, the "one who seeks to trip him), he simply and directly says, "BE GONE." He does this with the full knowledge that old Mr. Satan will be back. Treating the devil like flies on a summer picnic table, Jesus shoos him off! Maybe it is that simple. Try it! I have found it works more often than you would expect.

Second, trust the strength of your roots and traditions. Some of us come from deep and rich roots and traditions – in our families, our churches, our spiritual lives. When faced with temptation's snare, trust your roots. The rocks of our lives are real. Hang on to them in the floods of life. If however, you have no roots and traditions, may I recommend some? Get anchored in the power of prayer, the glory of God's word and the presence of worship. Jesus calls us to travel with him through the valley of the shadow and fear no evil, for he is with us. With Jesus as your ground of being, you will stand on sure and steady footing. He is an anchor in the storms of life. He is our rock and our salvation, as my opening prayer lifts up each week. If you need roots and traditions, a rock and an anchor, I highly recommend our Savior!

In defending against temptation, seek also a good therapist or a good spiritual director – or both. Some of us call ourselves stoic. We believe we can figure everything out all by ourselves. Left to the devices and desires of our own hearts and minds, we think we can work everything out by ourselves. We too

often think we can work out our own salvation. But in reality, the stoics are extinct. Seek a listening ear and a questioning voice. Seek a healthy person who has dedicated himself or herself to spiritual and mental and emotional health and well-being.

In overcoming temptation in the desert, Jesus vanquished his tempter with “BE GONE!” but he was also ministered to and saved by angels who came and cared for him. Even the Son of God didn’t make it on his own. What makes us think we are better than Jesus? Seek the angels whose hearts and minds are present and loving. You will find all of the good ones have angels who attend to them as well.

Also, listen to family and friends. While we discovered earlier, they may lead us away from discovering our true calling, they are also the ones who have been there for us from the earliest days of our lives. Trust that they care more deeply about you than sometimes they even know.

Finally, remember in facing temptation that you are never alone. Jesus is more than a heroic figure in old book. He is a living presence in the real world. St Patrick understood this. He wrote this and we refer to it today as St. Patrick’s Breastplate. Let us count on the power of the Trinity and the presence of our Christ to bind us to God’s love and deliver us from temptation.

I bind unto myself today
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three.

I bind this day to me for ever.
By power of faith, Christ's incarnation;
His baptism in the Jordan River;

His death on Cross for my salvation;
His bursting from the spicèd tomb;
His riding up the heavenly way;
His coming at the day of doom;*
I bind unto myself today.

I bind unto myself the power
Of the great love of the cherubim;
The sweet 'well done' in judgment hour,
The service of the seraphim,
Confessors' faith, Apostles' word,
The Patriarchs' prayers, the Prophets' scrolls,
All good deeds done unto the Lord,
And purity of virgin souls.

I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the starlit heaven,
The glorious sun's life-giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea,
Around the old eternal rocks.

I bind unto myself today
The power of God to hold and lead,
His eye to watch, His might to stay,
His ear to hearken to my need.
The wisdom of my God to teach,
His hand to guide, His shield to ward,
The word of God to give me speech,
His heavenly host to be my guard.

Against the demon snares of sin,
The vice that gives temptation force,
The natural lusts that war within,
The hostile men that mar my course;
Or few or many, far or nigh,
In every place and in all hours,

Against their fierce hostility,
I bind to me these holy powers.

Against all Satan's spells and wiles,
Against false words of heresy,
Against the knowledge that defiles,
Against the heart's idolatry,
Against the wizard's evil craft,
Against the death wound and the burning,
The choking wave and the poisoned shaft,
Protect me, Christ, till Thy returning.

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

I bind unto myself the Name,
The strong Name of the Trinity;
By invocation of the same.
The Three in One, and One in Three,
Of Whom all nature hath creation,
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word:
Praise to the Lord of my salvation,
Salvation is of Christ the Lord.

Bind yourself to Christ Jesus. He will lead you, not into temptation, but into deliverance from evil – but that is next week's sermon. Amen.

* Thanks to William Barclay's commentary on Matthew in writing on temptation. Barclay is quoted freely throughout this sermon.

Palm/Passion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Palm/Passion Sunday, April 17, 2011, dedicated to William James Holton, born on April 14, 2011, and to his parents Jason and Christen and sister Audrey, and always to the glory of God!

“Deliver Us from Evil”

Matthew 6:13b

(Part VII of VIII in the sermon series “The Lord’s Prayer”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Evil was headline news in this morning's *Columbus Dispatch*. The headline reads, **Triple Murder**, *Why Did Littleton Kill? Evil, He Says*. The story tells of Sammy Littleton who murdered three people from Bellefontaine, Ohio, - 26-year- old Tiffany Brown and Dick and Gladys Russell, a couple in their 80s. In a videotaped confession, Littleton tells officers over and over again, *"I think evil thoughts all the time. . . .Why would a person have those kind of thoughts all the time? I mean, why. . . . I am a bad, bad person."* (*Columbus Dispatch*, by Holly Zachariah, Section A, Page 1, Sunday, April 17, 2011). Not one of us could easily challenge Sammy Littleton's self-assessment. All of us could add our condemnation.

Psychologist M. Scott Peck wrote a book entitled, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*. Peck contends that evil people are real and they are easy to hate and fear. But, he continues, the challenge of our time is to heal human evil and the only way to do that is to face it directly. It is, in Peck's words, not as far from each of us as we would like to believe. He offers a simple definition of evil, one which we will see, is not far off from the root of the words Jesus used.

Dr. Peck describes evil as *"that force residing inside or outside of human beings that seeks to kill life or liveliness. Goodness is its opposite. Goodness is that which promotes life and liveliness."* (M.S. Peck, *People of the Lie*, Touchstone Books, New York, N.Y., 1983, p. 43). Evil is that which kills life and liveliness.

With this definition, Scott Peck brings evil closer to us than the brutality and hate-filled actions of Sammy Littleton. It is a closeness that Jesus himself addresses in the Lord's Prayer. At the end of his prayer, Jesus calls out to his father, *"Ela patzan min bisha," "Deliver us from evil."* Here in Aramaic, "evil" is best

translated “unripeness” or “inappropriate action.” Jesus is asking his daddy (Abba) to deliver his followers from that which diverts their attention, that which keeps them from advancing, that which keeps them from doing the right action at the right time.

Closer still, I wonder, what is it that you and I do that is not fruitful? What is it that is our inappropriate action? What do you do that diverts your attention from goodness, that keeps you from advancing, that keeps you from doing the right action at the right time? From THAT presence - the one that creates fruitless lives and inappropriate actions - Jesus prays we are ALL delivered. “*Ela patzan min bisha.*”

In his little book, *The Lord's Prayer*, Catholic priest and liberation Theologian Leonardo Boff writes that the evil of our times from which we need to be delivered is extreme individualism and a lack of compassion. We have become narcissistic in our economic drives that create a sense of personal entitlement and collective selfishness. With such erosion of our connections to others and our need to care for them, Boff says we shouldn't be surprised when evil in the form of violence and apathy deliver people into its control. Father Boff writes:

Each generation has its own 'evil one' against which it must particularly protect itself and because of which it must implore divine protection. This evil being embodies the widespread wickedness that permeates humanity. . . . When 2/3's of the world's population are held prisoner under a legion of demons: hunger, sickness, disintegration of the family, shortage of housing, schools, and hospitals . . . (the evil one has taken hold and will not let go)” But, the evil one looks a lot like people we know. (L. Boff, *The Lord's Prayer*, Orbis Press, Maryknoll, NY, 1975, p. 119)

Looking out on the faces of his own time, Jesus saw this presence. He had been tormented by the Evil One while fasting in the wilderness. He was assaulted by the Evil One every time he tried to deliver people from sickness and death. In this week we call holy, Jesus would face evil beyond belief. As he taught his beloved community to pray, he knew what they faced. He knows what we face. The force from which we need to be delivered, the one which keeps us from doing good, the one which keeps us away from one another is a force whose hold on humanity must be broken. His final appeal to God in this prayer he has granted us reverberated through Palestine and shakes the earth to this day. “*Ela patzan min bisha.*”

We have entered the week that is called *transitus*. From Latin, *transitus* means the movement from one place to another. Our Holy Week rituals will move us from the festive songs and celebrations of Palm Sunday, to the Passover Seder and prayerful loneliness of Maundy Thursday, to the Passion of Christ on Good Friday, to the silence of the tomb on Holy Saturday and to Christ’s glorious resurrection on Easter.

At the center of this *transitus*, we find our Lord battling with demons and humans while being ministered to by angels and humans. He needs deliverance from evil. He needs God to hear and answer his prayer. Yet, it is the silence of God and the inappropriate action of humanity that will hold together this week in great dis-ease. - whose silence is finally broken by the glory of next week’s rising.

All of this said, we must acknowledge and face the presence of evil in our times (and in every time) for it is truly that which keeps us from doing good. Remember, the word “Satan” simply translates “the one who trips us,” “the one who causes us to stumble and fall.” If we do not deal with that which trips us, the power of

darkness will grow and we will be dealt with on different terms. We will find ourselves lying face down with no way to rise again.

Nobel Peace Prize winner and author, Elie Wiesel, spent part of his early teenage years engulfed by the presence of evil that had spread like a cancer over the land of Germany and throughout the world. He was a Jew in Auschwitz, a concentration camp of Nazi Germany and the Third Reich of Adolf Hitler.

As Passover begins tomorrow night at sunset, and as we live with the tension of evil in our times, I give you his story, one which should hold us in the tension held in this week, a week for the Jewish Passover and our Christian Holy Week. Young Wiesel tells this story in his book *Night*:

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp today. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour.

'Where is God? Where is he?' someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the nooses after a long time, I heard the man call again., 'Where is God now?'

And I heard a voice in myself answer, 'Where is God? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows before us.'

Ela patzan min bisha

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011, dedicated to Mark Williams, our resurrection story this year, and always to the glory of God!

***“The Kingdom, and the Power
and the Glory are Yours
Forever. Amen.”***

Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 28:1-11

***(Final sermon in the series
“The Lord’s Prayer”)***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In a letter written shortly before his death, Thomas Carlyle described how during a sleepless night, he had meditated on the Lord’s Prayer phrase by phrase. He wrote, *“I discovered at every point that I was carried out beyond my depth.”*

This could easily describe the experience of most of us in praying the prayer our Savior has given. As we break it down phrase by phrase, we discover the true depth of its meaning. From the “Our Father,” to the holiness of God, to the coming of God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven, to God’s will being done, to receiving bread for our daily journey, to forgiving and being forgiven, to being led out of temptation’s path and being delivered

from evil, each petition carries us beyond “our little space and time” into the eternal realm of God. Thomas Carlyle’s words come to life as we are drawn into final doxology of praise: **“For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.”**

On this Easter Sunday as our risen savior blows open the doors to eternity in his rising from death to life, we have ascended a mountaintop of praise to God for God’s kingdom, power and glory as it comes to life in new ways.

We have just passed through the season in which our savior journeyed through the wilderness - overcoming the Evil One’s tempting offers to rule all the kingdoms of the earth, to have power equal to God and the glory beyond imagination. Jesus rejected each of these temptations from the Evil One on the grounds that God alone reigns over heaven and earth and fully knowing kingdoms, power and glory are not for anyone (including the Evil One) to sell or give away or for anyone else to receive!

We come even closer to this doxology in King David’s farewell prayer found in I Chronicles 29:11. David prays: *“Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory and the majesty. . . . Thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above it.”* Our New Testament trinity of praise echoes this classic ascription from David’s lips.

“Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory of God” is not a phrase found in the prayer that Jesus gave his disciples. It cannot be found in Luke’s version, or in the earliest manuscripts of Matthew. Modern translations do not include it, mentioning it only in footnotes. We first see it in the Didache written around 100 A.D. The Didache was an early manual of Christian teaching composed of 16 short chapters and less than 3,000 words. To the early

church fathers and mothers, it was the second most important book outside of the Bible.

Purists and literalists will say this phrase should not be in the prayer because it did not appear in the Gospels. I believe, the fact that this phrase first appears in the Didache and then is joined to the rest of the prayer for the past 1,900 years strengthens the prayer.

Imagine your Christian brothers and sisters in the 2nd century struggling under the sword of the Roman Empire. They are meeting in homes, in caves, in the catacombs of the dead. They worship in hiding for fear of being killed.

Go back in time. The church of Jesus Christ is several generations old. It has been 70 years since the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These have become increasingly remote stories for the believers. Removed 1,970 years, I hear from some of you who feel similarly. Thinking back, for Christians in the year 100 A.D., Jesus' death and resurrection would have felt as Pearl Harbor feels to my children and me. It is a story I have heard from parents and read about in history books. It is not vivid. It is not close to my reality. Closer to home, imagine how every child 10 and younger feels when we mention 9/11. They must think we are talking in codified language - although it seems like yesterday to us. Seventy years distance from something is a long time.

Now, Jesus' prayer - passed down through the texts and the generations - is given new life. God's kingdom, power and glory are here and they are coming! God is the ruler yet! God is real and God's real presence embodies hope.

Eighty years ago, Dr. L. P. Jacks wrote a little book that Dr. Morgan Noyes quoted in one sermon on the Lord's Prayer from this pulpit in 1959. Addressing people beset by difficulties in life, Dr. Jacks wrote,

We are too apt to rest in the thought that to follow Christ is merely to follow a teacher, a reformer, so that enough has been done when we have repeated his doctrine of (God's love and human kindness), voted for his precepts, and practiced as much of them as we can or as much as we find convenient. . . . But, to follow Christ is to follow a victor in life's battles, a conqueror over suffering and death, through the completeness of his loyalty to our Great Companion - (even God his father).

Someone else said the result of Christ's resurrection was not a committee with an executive, but a fellowship with an experience. It is in the glory of the resurrected Christ that the kingdom, power and glory of our God become real! In raising Christ from death, God overcomes the principalities and powers of this world. In raising Christ from death, God demonstrates his power and glory for all time to come - and beyond time as well.

However, the triumphant nature of these words, spoken safely in a high pulpit in Columbus, Ohio, is tempered this day. They feel so much removed from the hills and desert mountains in which Jesus rose from the dead. Our sisters and brothers there, the small number of Palestinian Christians numbering only 175,000, are in my heart and mind. Did you know, we have more United Church of Christ folks in Ohio than there Palestinian Christians in the land of Jesus. Their numbers are weak and shrinking. Because of laws within Israel that keep them separated from one another, they face daily hardship and oppression. They are mostly poor and often feel forsaken and forgotten. But make no mistake about it - they are AN EASTER PEOPLE! Over many of the doors of

Christians in the Holy Land is St. George slaying the dragon. They are strong in the face of so much hardship.

Last Easter, faced with a growing sense of isolation and disconnection from the other 2.1 billion Christians worldwide, Christian leaders in the Land of the Holy One sent an Easter letter to all the rest of us. Amid our trumpet blasts and joyous “alleluias”, most of us did not hear their cry. The patriarchs, archbishops and bishops, pastors and priests wrote to us:

(Daily we face hardship) We, know the power of despair. We know the power of evil. We know the power of the ‘principalities and powers’ of this world, which promote agendas of division and oppression to bring harm to God's people throughout God's creation. We, with you, know the power of sin and death.

We also know the power of the Resurrection. We know the power of God to bring hope out of despair. We know the power of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, to use forgiveness and love to conquer evil. We know the power of God in Christ to confront those same ‘principalities and powers’ to promote faith, mutual respect, compassion and courage to speak the truth to benefit all of God's people. We know the power of the forgiveness of sins to redeem relationships in families and among the family of nations. We know the power of the gift of eternal life for all who believe.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen. He is Risen Indeed. Alleluia!

Like our 1st century brothers and sisters in Christ, the Christians in the Holy Land are intimately connected to the days of crucifixion and resurrection. They know that kingdoms and the power and glory belong NOT to earthly rulers, but to God almighty. The Palestinian Christians are a Resurrection People! Their worship, their churches, their children, their joyful spirit sing of faith, hope and love. And when they pray the Lord’s Prayer, it is with determination and the sober realism of life lived for Christ in

his land, in his path. May we follow their model of passionate faith lived in the light, life, and love of the risen Christ.

A beloved colleague of mine likes to say, “Our greatest days are today and tomorrow.” How will we live Christ’s prayer in the resurrection joy of our greatest days - today and tomorrow?

It is my hope and prayer you live fully into God’s promise found in the Lord’s Prayer. Live into God’s holiness, into God’s will, receiving the gift of life God offers in daily bread, forgiveness of sins and through which he leads us out of temptation and away from the Evil One.

If we are bold to speak the prayer Christ has given us, may we also be bold as we live into the fullness of God’s kingdom, power, and glory promised here as well. God bless and keep you strong in the faith of our resurrected Lord - today and tomorrow. Amen.

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