

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.

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