

“Teach Us to Pray the Lord’s Prayer”*

**Joel 2: 1–2, 12–17, 2 Corinthians 5:20—6:10,
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

**Part I of VIII in the Lenten sermon series,
“The Lord’s Prayer”**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, March 2, 2022, dedicated to the people of Ukraine and the resistance movement in Russia and always to the glory of God!

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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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The first time I met Larry Trexler – 37 years ago – the scare on his forehead stood out noticeably. It was an indentation about one inch above his eyebrows and it was deep in the center of his forehead. Larry was quiet, pleasant, kind, thoughtful and as one of the other members of my first church in Cleveland said, “Larry, is a man of prayer.” The scar was so noticeable that it begged questions – but somehow I heard the voice of my mom saying, “do not ask. Do not ask.” So, I stopped that first time as I tried not to stare at the scar.

A few weeks later, Larry called and asked if we could meet. Of course, I said. We met in my office and he sat down and said, “I want

to tell you the story of how the Lord's Prayer saved my life." He went on to describe a night, a few years before, when he was 27, that he was closing the Convenience Store on the West Side of Cleveland and as he went to lock the front door, a man with a gun came in and pointed it at his head. He was scared to death but did everything the man demanded including giving him \$200. Then the man tied him up and pointed the gun at Larry's temple and said, "say goodbye to this life." Larry bowed his head and he started to pray the Lord's Prayer. A single shot was fired and the man fled. Somehow, miraculously, Larry opened his eyes to realize he was alive as he laid in the pool of his own blood.

He continued, *"Rev. Tim, it was the only prayer I could think of in the moment of terror before I died. Because I tilted my head down and started praying the Lord's Prayer, the way the bullet entered, saved me. I only got to the words, 'Our Father' before the shot was fired. It was miracle. My life was saved by our God. My life was saved by our Father.*

When I awoke, I gave my life to God since he had spared my life. I pray the Lord's Prayer constantly. That prayer has led me to faith and a life of devotion. I am grateful every minute of every day. I am here to ask how I can work with you to serve God and the church."

And so we began our journey of prayer and devotion – Larry teaching me how to pray. You know, when you come out of Yale, you think you know how to pray, because they confirm this degree upon you. But I knew nothing. Larry taught this young pastor what prayer looked like.

Called the Paternoster, "The Our Father," the Lord's Prayer has saved many lives through the years. I am a living testimony to that. Perhaps you are too. With only 64 words, the Paternoster is the prayer given

by Jesus to his disciples when they asked him, “how should we pray?” As his disciples, this prayer is ours too.

The Paternoster really is a total prayer. Its concerns embrace the whole world – from the coming of the kingdom of God to daily bread. Large things and small things; spiritual things and material things, inward things and outward things – nothing is beyond the purview of this prayer.

It is lifted to God in every conceivable setting. It rises from the altars of every great cathedral and from obscure shanties in distant lands. It is spoken by children and kings; by paupers and princes. The soldiers and citizens of Ukraine fighting for their lives and for freedom are praying this prayer at this hour as we worship. And Christians, across the globe, are praying this prayer in churches great and small for Ash Wednesday services. It is prayed at weddings and on death beds. Nobel Laureates and noble illiterates. It is everyone’s prayer. For me, it was the first prayer I learned as a child. I learned at 3 years-old that I wasn’t allowed to talk in church – which was really troubling for me. So I learned that the people who were talking were saying one thing, over and over and over again. I didn’t learn it well and I didn’t learn it right, I was able to talk in church. From the first days in prayer in worship, that prayer has changed my life. It is the first prayer I pray each morning when I rise and the last prayer each night. How about for you? How is the Lord’s Prayer part of your life?

The Lord’s Prayer is essentially a petitionary prayer – a prayer of asking.

Adoration is present at both the beginning and the end of the prayer – but petition forms the heart the prayer. Seven perfectly crafted requests – three of which are entreaties to God for help. God, help

me. **Give** me daily bread. God, help me. Forgive me for what I have done and help me forgive others as you have forgiven me. God, **deliver** me from all temptation and evil.

Give. Forgive. Deliver. Add to these the Coming of God's Kingdom on Earth, The Will of God being Done and glory and power – which comes from God – being returned to God. There you have it. Over the next seven sermons, Emily and I will unpack the Lord's Prayer, line by line, phrase by phrase. We will do this through preaching and then again, we will look at the Breath of God in the prayers of our lives through our teaching times in this season. All of this has been shared and is at your fingertips – this prayer of ours.

On this Ash Wednesday, when we are called into the heart of confession and prayer, I want to call on each of us to deepen our prayer life. To pray is to change. Prayer is a great grace. Prayer is a gift from God to give us a pathway whereby our lives can be overtaken by love and joy; justice and peace; patience and kindness; goodness and faithfulness; gentleness and self-control.

The movement begins with inward steps because without an interior change in our hearts and minds, transformation cannot take place. If we cannot be still, if we cannot be humble, if we cannot be open, we cannot be changed and we cannot become a new person with a new perspective. Prayer opens all of this portal. Prayer opens our heart. Prayer stops us and instills in us the need for transformation.

As we step into Lent, I ask that each one of us give ourselves over to prayer. Think of Larry so many years ago, who bowed his head, in the midst of facing his moment of death and all he could say was "Our Father," and woke up alive with a bullet one centimeter from his brain. This may be too brutal a visual for too many to grasp.

But consider Sojourner and Harriet; consider Coretta and Martin; consider Mother Teresa and Bishop Tutu; consider your mother and father, your grandmother and grandfather, your children, yourself – on your knees – talking to God. In the end, that is all prayer is about. It is about talking to God. Each of us needs to stop worrying about being perfect in prayer and simply pray as we can - not as we can't. Stop worrying. Start praying.

We need to talk to God. We need to start with a simple prayer. We begin right where we are – without pause, without judgement of ourselves or listening to any judgement from others.

If you are just beginning, you may not have a prayer. Your prayer may start something like this: *“To whom it may concern. I guess I will call you ‘God’ – but I am not really sure about all that. I have never talked to you before. And I am not sure where you are or who you are. But I know there is something out there, something beyond myself, something outside of my daily existence that needs a source of light and life and hope beyond myself. I know that something is missing in my life. I am not sure what that something is. I only know that it might involve you. It might have to do with words I have never said – like ‘I’m sorry’ or ‘let me try something new,’ or ‘I love you.’ I know I am stubborn. I know I am easily distracted. I know I am self-centered. And I know I need help. I know I need something more than I have right now. Please help me. Goodbye.”*

That’s how it happens. Just take a breath and pray.

In time, the prayer may take on more words, more feeling, more of a conversation, and eventually – a possible conversion of the heart. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. For today, let’s just start talking to God. Simply start. That will help.

So here we go.... “Our Father...” Amen.

*This sermon, in part, has been inspired by Richard Foster's book, *Prayer: Finding The Heart's True Home*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, CA, 1992.

