

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

**Dt. 26:1-11, Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13
Based on Matthew 6:6-15**

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

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March 6, 2022

From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 1, March 6, 2022, dedicated to Grace Glaros, to Maddie McWilliams, and Colleen Merrill 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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As we step into the Lord’s Prayer today, I want to remind everyone – once again – that this prayer is THE most important prayer of our faith. It really is a center to our life of prayer. It was given as a great gift to all of Jesus’ followers when he was asked to teach people how to pray. We will be exploring what the prayer Is, what the prayer Says and what the prayer calls us to do.

Remember, the words Jesus says just before the prayer begins in Matthew 6:9 – simply this – “Pray like this.” Everything that follows focuses on what he (and his disciples) felt was most important to

him. So, to be committed to Jesus meant to pray for, to yearn for, and live for what is in this prayer.

Marcus Borg reminds us in *Speaking Christian*, what the Lord's Prayer does not include. What is missing may be really disappointing to Christians who live their lives in a heaven-and-hell framework. **It has nothing to do with an afterlife.** There is no petition asking God to take us to heaven when we die. This is not a stairway to heaven prayer. **It has nothing to do with material success.** There is no petition asking God to see that we prosper – an important point for those who follow a Prosperity Gospel. **There is nothing in this prayer about belief.** It does not ask God to “help us to believe.” For those who want to focus on those who are “Believers” and “not believers,” as “true believers” and “heretics,” as “good” or “bad” people; “Saints” or “Sinners,” this prayer given by Jesus doesn't go there. Jesus is not interested in belief in this prayer. **And, it's not about Jesus.** This is interesting because while it lifts up Jesus' central concerns, there is nothing here that calls people to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. He literally gave his life for us – to not focus on him but on God (Borg, *Speaking Christian*, p. 225).

What's in it is rich. So, let's begin digging... **“Our Father...”**

We begin with an intimate word for Father – coming from the Aramaic. It is “Abba.” It means, “Dad” or “Daddy.” It is the name for God that Jesus uses constantly through the Gospels. There is no more personal word to call God than “Abba.” It is the name that young children use for their own father. There have been times I have been on playgrounds in Israel and I will hear children calling out to their fathers, “Abba, Abba.” It warms my heart.

“Abba” is also an expression used by students for their beloved teacher. It is family imagery – about intimacy and belonging. Using “Abba” to open this prayer clearly says that God is personal. Jesus wants us to be in a personal relationship as we step into this prayer. God is dear and intimate and anyone using this prayer is part of the family.

Some challenge the patriarchal nature of this opening, naming God as “father” and not “mother” or “Creator” or some other name which is more universal. I absolutely understand that. When I hear the Lord’s Prayer offered, I often hear many of you and others changing the word “Father.” I have many variations on this. I don’t have any problem with that. But, when you change the opening, remember that you are changing the intimate, beloved, relationship which Jesus is intending to offer us as our relationship with God. When “Father” is an obstruction to that, when getting to this relationship is blocked by “Father” for you, then you must choose a name that speaks to the depth of the feeling and the intimacy of the relationship. My cousin, the Rev. Dave Long-Higgins, replaces the name God in his prayers and poetry, with “Love.” Perhaps that works for you. But this should be a personal choice, drawing you into the depth of meaning for you – an intimate name for God.

“...Who Art in Heaven...” immediately takes us from the intimate “Abba” of playground, family, and closeness on the ground to the vastness of heaven. It pulls us from the personal to the cosmic. It moves us literally from earth to heaven. Heaven is a good place to imagine God to be. We all get swept away by Walter Chalmers Smith’s hymn – “Immortal, Invisible.” You know the words: “Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light, inaccessible, hid from our eyes,

most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.”

But Jesus has us working on this intimate relationship with “Abba,” and now God is “Unresting, unhasting and silent as light.” For all of us seeking a personal relationship with “Abba,” it may feel like a mixed message. We wonder, “Are you close to me or are you in heaven?”

In his book, *“Our Father Who Aren’t in Heaven,”* our member and friend, Rev. Bob Turner, who shared his teaching and writing with our Wednesday Book group last year, makes the case that God is truly in our presence. God is right here among us. We need to, in Bob’s words, “Change God’s Address.” Biblical scholar, Fr. John Dominic Crossan, makes the point in his writing on the Prayer, “Heaven’s in great shape; earth is where the problems are.” Or as I like to say, “We can be so heavenly minded that we become no earthly good.”

The challenge of changing God’s address is changing the very meaning of Jesus’ words (that is not Bob Turner’s intention – by the way). What if we could see the essence of our “Immortal, Invisible, in light, inaccessible God” right here? The rest of the prayer actually ends up going there. We will be spending lots of time on earth as the prayer unfolds.

For a moment, let us breathe deep the vastness, the glory, the grandeur of God. As the hymn continues, “thy justice like mountains, high soaring above, thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.”

Can you see God in this vastness touching us here on earth?

It is a good thing to be transfixed and changed by our God who is much bigger than our biggest problems; deeper than the deepest part of the ocean; vaster than our grandest dreams, and more spectacular than our greatest days or our most glorious than music and poetry we have to express our love for God. It is a good thing to pray to our God in heaven knowing that God also has a home in each of our hearts. It is a good thing to be “Heavenly minded” so long as we are earthly good.

“...Hallowed be thy name...” Hallowed is a word which we rarely use in our daily lexicon of language (unless we are near Halloween – “All Hallow’s Eve”). Am I right? It means “holy.” Hallow actually means “Saints.” Both words translate from the Greek word, “hagioi” which means “holy ones” or “One’s set apart.” Paul uses this word often in his letters when referring to the “Saints of God” in the church. So “hallowed,” as a derivative constantly used meaning “holy.”

There are at least two ways to hear this line. Are we reminded to hallow God’s name and keep it holy by being reverential to God’s name? Or it is addressed to God so that “God’s is made Holy?” Since the rest of the prayer is addressed to God, the later seems more likely.

But what does it mean to ask God to make God’s name holy? The image is of God as “Father” – therefore householder of the world. Because the first century society was patriarchal the head of the household was spoken of as male.

So how does one judge whether a householder is a “good householder?” How does the household run? Are children well taken

care of? Does everybody have enough? Are some pampered and others neglected (how you answer this one might depend on where you are in the birth order)? How are the animals cared for? How about the buildings? It is in good shape?

To ask God to make God's name holy is to ask God to make the world into a good household. It is parallel to the and synonymous with the kingdom petition – “Your kingdom come.... On earth as it is in heaven” (which is coming up next week).

Again, the Lord's Prayer is a summary of what matters most to Jesus. When we pray The Lord's Prayer, we are praying what he was passionate about, what he was concerned about. And because we believe Jesus was the decisive revelation of God's passion in this world, we are praying for God's dream for the world. To pray this is to be invited, enlisted into participation in God's passion and the passion of Jesus (Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian*, HarperOne, NY, NY, 2011, pp. 229-230).

We have a long way to go... the prayer is just starting. We have to pace ourselves. It is a long season.

In closing, I want to share some thoughts from one of my heroes in the faith, Dr. John Perkins. Dr. Perkins calls the Lord's Prayer “the perfect prayer.” Dr. John Perkins, now 91 years old, prays continuously each day of his life. However, it is the Lord's Prayer that centers all his faith and action. He says, “The Lord's Prayer is our daily call to daily action for justice. Sometimes I will be in church and listening to people praying The Lord's Prayer. And I give thanks to God that he gave us the prayer that frames our care for the hungry poor and our love for all humanity.”

A prayer that frames our care for the hungry poor and our love for every person – that’s a keeper. Let’s keep that in mind as we step next week into God’s kingdom coming on earth. Amen.