

Lord's Prayer

Matthew 6:5-13

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

Today, we're launching a summer series about prayer. We're calling it "Prayer for People who have Trouble Praying." That doesn't mean if you *don't* have trouble praying, you can check out. But the truth is, especially in the liberal church, a lot of us struggle with prayer. That's OK. Prayer is a little weird. Are there "right" and "wrong" words? What's even the point—doesn't God already know everything before I say it, anyway? It's really easy to get lost in your own self-consciousness when you try to pray, especially at the beginning.

I promise that in this series I will not try to make prayer "simple" or "easy." But I will always insist that prayer is essential. And I believe that those of who struggle with prayer do want to be better at it. We all want to learn how to pray. We will learn again how to pray by gathering around some of the most beautiful prayers that have ever been written down. These prayers show us what it looks like to be a human being speaking to the divine. These prayers can show us how to pray.

⁵ "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.^b

⁷ "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for God knows what you need before you ask...

⁹ "Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

 Your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
 but rescue us from the evil one.

Whatever part of Christianity you come from, **you probably know this prayer as well as you know your name.** It's the one prayer we have memorized. If you hang around Christianity long enough, this prayer gets inside you and becomes a part of you.

We read Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer, but a version is also in Luke's gospel. In Luke, the disciples ask Jesus to show them how to pray—they admit they don't know; in response, Jesus teaches them this prayer. One way of thinking about the Lord's Prayer is that it is a prayer that teaches us how to pray. No matter how long we've been praying, we all need to be taught. All prayer begins with that same inner posture of humility; even a

sense of our own inadequacy. If you feel inadequate to the task of praying, you are exactly where you should be.

What I'd like to do today is walk through this very familiar prayer together, looking at it line by line. First, I would divide the Lord's Prayer into 2 basic sections.

1. Number one is the address: "Our Divine Parent in heaven, holy is your name."
2. The second section are a set of petitions—things we are asking for from God:
 - a. Your kingdom come
 - b. Your will be done
 - c. Give us our daily bread
 - d. Forgive our sins
 - e. Don't lead us into temptation.

Some of you will quickly say, "that's not the end of the prayer"—but what we have come to know as the "traditional" end to the Lord's Prayer ("for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever") was not originally in Matthew and was added in some early Christian communities to make it sound better. But I'm going to ignore that ending. Let's jump in.

The Lord's Prayer begins by asking you to have an image of God. Every prayer requires an act of theological imagination. Prayer asks you to try and see God in your mind's eye. For some of you, it may be better to describe this less as a seeing, more as a feeling. Can you feel in your nerve endings a Presence.... All prayer imagines God as a partner in intimate conversation.

Jesus' prayer begins, "Our Father." Jesus wants us to address God as a loving parent. Parenting is the most profound caring relationship that we know. God is a caring, loving parent.

Years ago at NDPC we began messing with the phrase, Our Father. First we put "Mother" in parentheses. Later, we substituted "Divine Parent." We're not trying to quarrel with Jesus but the repeated use of "Father" can trick us into thinking God is a male parent. God is a Loving Parent. We want you to be able to see God as either Father or Mother or both. I encourage you to try both, see how they feel. Either way, the point is that you should know you are speaking to a Divine Parent who brought you in to the world, who loves you just as you are with an unfailing love.

Where is this parent to whom we are speaking? The prayer says, "in heaven." I want to be clear again, "heaven" is not a place, it is a time. In the Biblical imagination, "heaven" is how things will be when creation is fulfilled. Heaven is a future when all relationships—person to person, human to animal, human to soil and water, human to God, are ordered and guided by love and justice. Heaven is the time of right relationship. While God is "in heaven," Jesus says heaven is breaking into our reality at all times. Our Loving Parent is in the future, and this future is always coming toward us.

Our Loving Parent in heaven. The we say, "holy is your name." God's name in Hebrew, revealed in the miracle of the burning shrubbery cannot be pronounced and should never be invoked casually. God's name, like God, is holy, which means awesome, lovely, wonderful, frightening, luminous, beautiful. The one you're speaking to is holy, which should fill you with fear and fascination.

Now that we know who we're talking to, what do we talk about? The Lord's Prayer shows that a good prayer asks things of God. But what? A bigger house? A newer car? A new president? Maybe. But our "petitions" don't begin with selfish things.

The first thing we ask is for God's kingdom to come; for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

This first petition is a kind of response to how we addressed God in the opening. We said, "God, you are Our Loving Parent, You Who are in your good and just future, we ask 'bring your future to us,' or put another way, "may your kingdom come."

God's future and God's kingdom are synonyms. We pray that the world that Jesus inaugurated come to be. A world in which outcasts and brought in, the last become the first, in which there is enough for everyone, in which debts are forgiven and justice is for all people—may your kingdom come. Let our world be made into heaven.

In order for this to happen, this prayer says there's one key step: you and I have got to get our big fat wills out of the way. God, let *your will* be the one that guides and shapes my life.

- Before we can pray, "Thy Kingdom come," we must be willing to pray, "My Kingdom go." –
- Wendell Berry wrote that he had prayed the Lord's Prayer for a long time before realizing that when he prayed "thy will be done" it meant that his will and God's will *may not be the same*. God's will may be different than yours. You may not get what you ask for. This is the heartbreak part of prayer. It means there may be much more suffering than you ever asked for or thought you could manage.

You might say that there is this confrontation of wills in every prayer. In prayer, our will meets God's. Jesus tells us to resolve this confrontation by asking, "God, your will be done."

The next request is as practical as it gets. We say "Give us today our daily bread." We don't say, "give me my bread." We say give us all bread. It's a vision for feeding the world. The big secret is that nobody actually knows what the Greek word "epiousios" that gets translated as "daily" means. It's not found anywhere else in Greek. Translators are basically guessing. Could mean "today's bread," it could mean "tomorrow's bread." It could mean "yummy" bread. It probably means, "give us today the essential bread." Give us all hearty, filling, energy-giving, life-sustaining bread.

This daily bread petition reminds us that prayer isn't esoteric. Prayer should never take you too far away from what you need: food, water, shelter, clean air, safety, love, peace. This prayer tells you to imagine that God's will is for every person to be nourished. In our world in which some have so much food that we are sick and others have so little that we are sick, a prayer that asks God to provide daily nourishment for everyone is prayer for a revolution in values. When you pray, "give us our daily bread," you are not only asking God to care for all people; you are also declaring yourself as part of the movement of people who will share your bread freely and not rest until all are fed.

Two more petitions. We pray "*forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.*" Some people think the most controversial thing in the Lord's Prayer is whether you say "sins," "debts," or trespasses here. You want to know which one is right? They're all right. Luke's gospel says, "sins," Matthew's gospel says "debts," and Episcopalians say trespasses... and Episcopalians are always right. All three of those words help us put forgiveness at the core of a Christ-like life. Bread for everyone. Forgiveness for everyone. I don't know which is more revolutionary: the idea that everyone should be fed, or the idea that the future of every human relationship lies beyond categories of "right" and "wrong"—the idea that we all live under the judgment of God's profoundly wide mercy.

Forgiveness makes things new. It makes the broken whole. Being forgiven allows you to love yourself. Forgiving others creates hope where there was only pain and anger.

Finally, we pray, "Lead us not into temptation. Deliver us from evil." It's also a bit unclear what this means. Are we saying that God sometimes leads us into temptation? Scripture does say that God consented to Job's trials and the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil, although I'm not ready to say that God "leads" us into temptation. Several translations of this line suggest a better version is something like "God, don't let us fall into temptation." "Deliver us from evil," could just as well be translated as "deliver us from the Evil One." Regardless of the translation and theological issues this request raises, this prayer is clear that the struggle of this life is real. God's kingdom isn't here—not yet; our world is dangerous and morally precarious. You can't always trust yourself to know the right thing to do.

There's such deep humility here. We will experience temptation. There is evil, even in the world that belongs to God. When we pray this prayer, we confess that the evil is not all "out there" in others. It's in each of us. We must ask God to help us—to deliver us—from evil.

The 20th century mystical theologian Simone Weil said that another description of prayer is "absolutely unmixed attention." Attention, for Weil, is our most powerful means of spiritual enlightenment. In our world, attention is rarer and rarer, drawn to the dopamine hits of our phones. How do we learn to pay attention to the world, to our place in it? To God?

It wouldn't be the worst idea to begin by paying attention to the words of this prayer. That's what Simone Weil did.

I recited the Our Father... every day before work, and I repeated it very often in the vineyard. Since that time I have made a practice of saying it through once each morning with absolute attention. If during the recitation my attention wanders or goes to sleep, in the minutest degree, I begin again until I have once succeeded in going through it with absolutely pure attention. Sometimes it comes about that I say it again out of sheer pleasure, but I only do it if I really feel the impulse. The effect of this practice is extraordinary and surprises me every time, for, although I experience it each day, it exceeds my expectation at each repetition.

Let us hear the prayer, again—close your eyes if you'd like...

Our Loving Parent in heaven,
Holy is your name.

10 Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

11 Give us today our bread.

12 And forgive us when we hurt others,
as we also have forgiven those who hurt us.

13 And do not bring us to temptation,
but rescue us from evil.