

Introduction

It was around 2000 years ago that Jesus' disciples and followers sat on a hillside in Galilee and listened to Jesus as he delivered his *Sermon on the Mount*. He began this sermon with what we have come to call the *Beatitudes*. Many of us know these by heart, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted..." and so on; and he ended with the parable about the wise person who builds their house on the rock by putting Jesus' teaching to use in their lives.

In the middle of the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus responds to the disciples' question about how to pray by teaching them the *Lord's Prayer*.

The *Lord's Prayer* is beyond familiar; it is ingrained. It has become the standard in our liturgical and private prayer. We begin and/or end many of our meetings right here at Zion by praying this prayer together. Most all of us know this prayer by heart and there are some who, near life's end, even when no other words come to them, can still recite the *Lord's Prayer*.

Yet...while many of us can recite this prayer with ease from rote memory, we seldom reflect more deeply on the meaning of the words we are praying. We rarely think about the deeper truths of this prayer and the statement it makes about what it means to be believers in Christ.

So, following last week's sermon on prayer in general, I would like to preach this week's sermon on a specific prayer; the prayer that Jesus taught us; the *Lord's Prayer*.

Body of the Text

As I began reading this text, my first questions came before the prayer itself was introduced. They had to do with the first few verses, where Jesus says: "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret". How did this prayer become so public? And then, right after this Jesus warns against using too many words, "and when you pray, do not keep on babbling", he says.

Why did he say these things? I especially wonder about this because I don't think that Jesus really had anything against longer prayers per se – just look at Matthew 14:23-25 where Jesus prayed through the night, or Matthew 26:36-40 where Jesus prayed long enough for his disciples to fall asleep. And I also do not think Jesus wanted us only to pray in a room alone. The *Lord's Prayer* itself is not singular at all but is spoken in plural form from start to finish (give *us* this day our daily bread, and forgive *us* our trespasses...etc.). It is not an "I" prayer but a "we" prayer. It seems meant to be prayed together.

In fact, it seems impossible to realize the promises of this prayer outside of community. There are too many inferences to the needs of others, about relationship, and about our involvement in God's work in our communities. Inwardness is not the endpoint of this prayer.

The answer as to why Jesus emphasizes private and short prayer seems linked to the statement Jesus makes directly after speaking about privacy and brevity. Jesus reminds his disciples, and us, that God already knows

our hearts before we say even a single word. God knows before we ask. What a wonderful statement this is. The God who created the universe is intimately aware of and involved in our lives. God's infinite reality of love gives itself away to us unconditionally as our lives.

So, with this in mind, it makes sense that Jesus would focus not on the act of prayer, which is not all that important as it may take many forms (as discussed in my sermon last week), but Jesus brings our attention to God, and God alone. Not one petition asks God to make *us* look good or to make *us* holy, and *only one petition in the Lord's Prayer has anything to do with our actions anyway* — that is the petition that asks God to forgive our trespasses “as we forgive those who trespass against us”...and this sounds more like an assumption than a request. This prayer is about *God's work* through us, through the world, and through grace...and it is about our letting go. “All great spirituality is somehow about letting go”.

Jesus is emphasizing authenticity and sincerity in prayer. This is what makes prayer, prayer. Apparently it is in the nature of God to pay close attention to heart-felt prayer. Even single-word prayers would suffice. The early monastics who are called Desert Fathers suggested, “Help!”, “Strength!”, “Heal!”, and “Thank you!” are complete prayers for a God who knows what we want to say before we say it. Try this the next time you feel overwhelmed with a difficulty in life, just say “Lord Help!” Or the next time you feel overwhelmed with gratitude say, “Thank you!”

I think this is important to remember, that God knows us so intimately. It draws us to faith, to trust, that the Lord is with us in all things; that God knows the dilemmas that we face, and that even within our dilemma God stands with us. God's promise is that he will never leave us.

There was a story about a famous ethicist who came to speak with Mother Teresa while she worked with the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. This man wanted to find some clear answers about where his life should go next. Who here has not felt this too?

Mother Teresa asked him what she could do for him, to which he responded that she could pray for him. “And what do you want me to pray for?” she asked. “Pray that I can find clarity,” he responded. “No, I will not do that,” she replied, “clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and is the first thing you must let go of.”

The ethicist responded that Mother Teresa always seemed to have such clarity herself and wondered why he could not request clarity too. To this Mother Teresa laughed and said, “I have never had clarity; what I have always had was *trust*. So I pray that you will trust God.”

Perhaps that is what is important, that we learn to trust that God is beside us in all that we do, that it is God's activity in our lives that saves us, and that God will never stop loving us. Trust is the basis of the *Lord's Prayer*, trust that God is in control of our lives and the world.

The Lord's Prayer - the address

The Lord's Prayer begins with what is called, the address - *Our Father who art in heaven*

It is a statement of such completeness that much of our identity and God's are proclaimed in only 4 of the first six words. Individually they resonate deeply with our lives in Christ.

First there is the word **Our** – this one word defines us as being in relationship with all humans, connected by our humanity. So, although when we pray we should do so authentically as if in private communion with God, as Jesus requested, we are also asked to remember our *common heritage* as children of God when we pray. God is *our* father, not just *my* father.

The second word **Father** is derived from the Aramaic word *Abba* (אבא) (see Mark 14:36) which is a more affectionate word for *father*, perhaps the way a child might address a parent. In essence it is more like saying “daddy” than the more official “father”. It invites us to explore how we understand God and God’s relationship with us – it is personal. This word, *Abba*, invites us to speak to God from our hearts in all our moods – joy and sadness, happiness and disappointment. In this address we learn that we may be real with God.

I have been doing some extra visitations these past few weeks now that Pastor Jeff is on holiday. Some of us are really struggling... with loneliness, with sickness, with uncertainty. God invites us to speak with him about precisely these things; to speak about our deepest pain, our most difficult sorrow. God hears these prayers. God hears us. God promises us, he hears us.

And then the last 2 words of the address, **In Heaven** – Alongside the personal is the divine essence of God. God is personal to us – God celebrates our joys, weeps our sorrows alongside us – but God is also above and beyond what is here on earth; intimately close yet ultimately unfathomable. This helps us remember our dependence on God; our lives belong fully to God.

Following the profound words of the address are 7 petitions; the first 3 tell us that prayer is first and foremost about God, and God’s work on earth and in heaven – and then, and only then, do we turn to ourselves and our needs and desires. This prayer is an acknowledgement of our absolute reliance on God, of submitting our will to the will of God.

The Lord’s Prayer – the first three petitions

First there is **petition 1** – *Hallowed be thy name*. It is a *one-point-in-time* action, which at the same time is a completed activity with a full resolution as well – *God’s name is hallowed* – today and always.

Interpreting **petition 2** can be a bit tricky – *Thy kingdom come*. As Karl Barth first pointed out, *our prayer for God’s kingdom does not hasten its arrival*. Even our best attempts at bringing peace and justice to the world will be sabotaged by our sinful natures. A better view of this petition would be that God’s kingdom comes on its own with or without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer *that it may also come to us, all of us*.

Ultimately, the *Lord’s Prayer* is an appeal to the final breaking-in of the *Kingdom of God* (even as it has already begun); a kingdom where God will be acknowledged and God’s will is completely accomplished, not only for the sake of us, but for the whole of creation.

Finally, in **petition 3** we hear the climax of the first half of the prayer – *Thy will be done*. Here we are asking God to be God.

The first 3 petitions can be read as follows:

Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done

...and then, with all 3, we ask that they are done *on earth as they are in heaven*.

The Lord's Prayer – the final 4 petitions

The final four petitions have to do with *our* needs and is a marvelous and poetic offering of our lives to God – past, present, and future:

Give us today our daily bread (petition 4). This is a request for physical sustenance and therefore makes God's work more than just for eternal needs alone but also for our need to eat and to live here on earth.

Someone was telling me last week after the service that they had always had difficulty in praying for themselves, about their own needs.

This petition gives us the ok to pray for our own needs too. It brings the needs of the present to God; the needs of ourselves and others as well. It asks community questions, like: *How can we ask for our daily bread without also assessing how much we have above what others need to survive?*

In **petition 5** we hear: *And forgive us our trespasses as we also have forgiven those who trespass against us* - This is a request for forgiveness, bringing past events to God.

This petition makes it clear that reconciliation with God, asking for God's forgiveness for our trespasses, must be complimented by us forgiving our neighbour - as an expression of the radical values of God's kingdom. It asks the community question: *How can we ask for forgiveness without being reminded of a neighbour, family member, or friend who remains unforgiven?*

Forgiveness is really the point of Jesus' entire ministry. In Matthew alone the word forgiveness is used 49 times. Remember my sermon of last month: the clearest non-negotiables of Jesus' teachings in the Gospels are to love your enemies and to forgive. We often ignore these objectives, or minimize them, even though they were clearly Jesus' major points. *And yet these objectives are only achieved through surrender and participation.* It is not about guilt or blame or keeping score; rather it is about new possibilities of obedience and lightness of being while growing into the love of God - of merging our wills with the will of God.

And finally, to **petitions 6 and 7** – *And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil*

Here is a request for help with temptations, perhaps more accurately a request for aid in our not succumbing to temptations, and *deliverance from evil*; both which bring future needs to the feet of God.

These last four petitions then, bring our whole lives to God – *past* (forgiveness of trespasses), *present* (to receive daily bread), and *future* (to not succumb to temptation) – as a reminder of who we are in God: dependant, weak, hungry, and poor yet simultaneously beloved and unconditionally accepted as children of a loving father.

Conclusion

So, there it is, the *Lord's Prayer* as an act of communion with our Father; a prayer which begins and ends with God's work in us, through us, and in the world. It is a declaration of our dependence on God.

Through our lives of prayer our souls are quietly opened by a God who calls us beloved. God attunes our activities toward serving others, forgiveness, and hospitality. And out of this quiet work we are affected, changed, and enriched.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen

(NOTE: this last portion of the prayer is not present in the earliest manuscripts)