

The Lord's Prayer: *Pray Then in This Way*
Matthew 6:5-15

Earlier this summer, Lindsay and I were talking about the importance of setting benchmarks for our children as they grow into their baptismal identity as a beloved child of God and to celebrate with them when they accomplish one of those marks of discipleship. Such benchmarks have typically included (in no particular order): being able to recite the first five books of the OT and the gospels in the New; being able to recite the 10 commandments; learning the Apostles' Creed and one of the earliest benchmarks is being able to pray the Lord's Prayer. For those of us who learned the Lord's Prayer as children one of the pitfalls of memorization be it a prayer or a creed is that our recitation becomes rote, mechanical repetition, and the familiar words we say lose their meaning and powerful impact. So, we decided to begin this fall with a church-wide, deep dive into the Lord's Prayer in worship and in CE.

There are two versions of the prayer Jesus taught us. One in Luke and one in Matthew. For this sermon series we will look at Matthew's version:

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. 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 your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 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. ¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Listening to kids learning the Lord's Prayer can make for some comical moments. Three year-old Caitlin learned the Lord's Prayer by repeating it line by line as her mother prayed it with her every night at bedtime. When it finally came time for Caitlin to go solo her mother listened with pride as she repeated each word correctly. Until she prayed "lead us not into temptation but deliver us some email." Another four year-old boy prayed "and forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets." Actually, when you stop to think about it that's not a bad metaphor for forgiveness. Probably the most famous Lord's Prayer blooper which you've no doubt heard came from a 3 year -old boy who prayed "Our father who does art in heaven Howard is his name."

Many of you probably have your own story of a young child's valiant attempt at praying the Lord's Prayer gone awry. Either from out of the mouth of your own child or from a child in your SS class. My own happened when my now 23 year-old niece Chloe was just 5. We were at a family reunion. My goddaughter, who was a year older than Chloe was proudly telling us she had just learned the Lord's Prayer at VBS. Proud Aunt that I am and knowing my niece Chloe regularly attended SS, I asked her, "Chloe do you know the Lord's Prayer?" At first, he looked totally confused, so I said, you know "Our Father..." Chloe got all excited, my heart leapt for joy thinking she was about to launch into the prayer, but instead she said "you mean Grandpa!" It's not too long before kids get it right and join the entire Christian family in praying the prayer Jesus taught us.

Jesus was in the middle his sermon on the mount when he said to his disciples "pray then in this way." "Then" means the prayer was connected to what he had just taught them which was how they were to live in righteousness and act with justice to join him in bringing about the kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus began by reminding them what the Law commanded but also, that righteousness isn't simply a matter of strict adherence to the letter of the Law. Repeatedly saying, "the law says, but I say to you", Jesus explained the greater righteousness in the kingdom of God which flows from an upright heart seeking to know and do the will of God. Then, Jesus told them how to be righteous by living a life of piety.

As Jews, the disciples knew a pious lifestyle consisted of three things: almsgiving (giving money to the poor); prayer (both public and personal) and fasting. As their Jewish ancestors had done for generations, the disciples would pray 3x day to the God of justice and righteousness for the coming of his kingdom. But Jesus warned them that there were those people who prayed for God's rule but failed to live by it. Hypocrites whose actions weren't congruent with what they professed to believe. Their acts of piety all for show. In other words, disciples of Jesus are to be righteous not just look righteous.

Jesus also admonished the disciples for praying like the Gentiles. They believed the gods to whom they prayed needed to be approached in just the right way using just the right words. As if they were reciting some sort of magical incantation pleasing enough that the particular god to whom they were praying would listen to their request. Prayer for them was a form of manipulation. Teaching his disciples to pray "Our Father" Jesus reminded them that their prayers were heard not by some distant, arbitrary and capricious God who needed to be persuaded to provide for their needs. They were praying to the One true God who knew what they needed even before they asked. The words they used didn't matter. What mattered most was the motivation in their hearts.

True prayer, Jesus taught is entering into our Lord's presence with a desire to deepen our relationship with him to receive his love, the grace we need and to be empowered by him to do God's will in our own lives that God's kingdom of justice and righteousness becomes a reality. Which means what we pray for we must be willing to participate in making it happen.

Notice, Jesus said, "pray then in this way." He didn't say "pray using these words." Jesus didn't mean for the Lord's Prayer to be viewed as either a rote prayer to be recited 3x a day nor mistaken for some sort of magical incantation. The Lord's Prayer is a model meant to shape how we are to pray because as we will see in the coming weeks the Lord's Prayer is a vision of how God's kingdom of justice and righteousness will come.

Before we look more closely at each petition it's helpful to remind ourselves of how Jesus described the kingdom in his parables. First, we remind ourselves there are two kinds of justice. In our American justice system justice is seeking retribution for harm done or punishment for those who deserve it. Biblical justice is not retribution but distribution. The earth and all that is in it belongs to God and God intends for it to be distributed fairly among all God's children. In his parables of the kingdom, Jesus describes God's kingdom as a well-run household or a well-managed family farm. God who is the Householder treats his servants fairly, his fields are well-tended, his animals fed, his buildings maintained. Children are fed, clothed and sheltered, the sick are cared for, and the responsibilities for caring and working the farm are spread fairly among the family members. The challenge Jesus issues in his parables, is do all have enough or do some have far too little while others have far too much, when it comes to physical, emotional, spiritual or financial needs. If not, how must things change so that all God's people have their fair share of God's world? That's the biblical notion of justice. It isn't an ideal form of socialism but as theologians now call it God's justice is "Enoughism." A world where there is enough of life's basic necessities to go around and everyone has enough to live. For those whose tendency is towards hoarding they will learn that in the kingdom of God enough is enough.

What we pray for we must be willing to participate in making it happen. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer we keep God's vision alive and we are empowered to work with our Risen Lord who is already working to make that vision a reality here on earth. The Prayer Jesus taught us is a prayer of hope. We pray that we may live in hope and become beacons of hope in our world.