

Sermon: August 7, 2016 – Matthew 6: 1-13
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

“Our Father, who art in heaven”.

With these words we enter into a prayer that unifies Christians around the world, the content and pattern of prayer given by Christ Jesus himself. As stated by Seminary professor Clayton Schmit, “there is a sense of solidarity in knowing that Christians around the globe are praying together...., and these words always unite us.”

At one level, I am right there with Professor Schmit: these words are held in common esteem by Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant; the very first word, “Our”, moves us from a faith that is singular to one that is plural; it’s a prayer that has been translated into hundreds of world languages, and that’s what I’ve chosen to share as visual images this morning; and, while my parents grew up in a religious educational system that involved lots of scripture memory verses, I did not, so the weekly recitation of this great prayer by memory reaches into a place in my heart that is inhabited by these words, almost on their own.

I’ll also let you in on a little secret that many preachers have experienced: in a service where the majority of the words spoken come from the preacher in the pulpit, the Lord’s Prayer is one of those moments in worship when the minister takes one step back and is inspired by the beauty of these words, spoken together by Christ-followers – it’s one of the holy moments in worship when words spoken as one, recited by heart, remind us that we are in this together: with one another, with Christians in other Churches, with those who have learned the same prayer in a mother tongue other than English, and with those who have gone before us.

And yet I am also fully aware of the challenges of this memorized prayer.

Seven years ago I did a tour of other Churches, attending a different congregation and denomination each Sunday morning, and was astonished to find that while each Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian and United congregation I worshipped with said the Lord’s Prayer every Sunday morning, not one of the Alliance, Baptist or Pentecostal Churches used it in public worship, except perhaps on a Communion Sunday. Now, in most of those more evangelical Churches there were no unison or responsive prayers of any sort, so part of it was a cultural difference between following a set order of service and a worship time with a much less formal shape, but the specific absence of the Lord’s Prayer was noteworthy. I never was able to uncover whether that was just a Calgary thing or if it’s more widespread than that, but as one trained in a mainline Church tradition it was more than a bit of an eye-opener that the Lord’s Prayer isn’t considered a “given” in everyone’s worship planning.

I know from what many of you have told me, that there are parts of this prayer where people feel free to substitute in their own wording. In particular, following the United Church’s move to more inclusive language back in the early 1980s, “Our Father” morphs into “Our Mother and Father”, the language about God being distant from us “in heaven” might be replaced by words like “in all places”, and then there’s the old question of whether it’s debts or trespasses that are being forgiven, and whether the prayer ends at “deliver us from evil” or keeps on going. So even when we say it together, I know that we aren’t saying it 100% together, and I support the deep integrity that goes in to those decisions: when you come across words that are not authentic to your beliefs, ya gotta do what ya gotta do.

And then there is the question of reciting something by rote, and whether the words become so automatic that they cease to hold meaning at all. In preparing for today’s sermon I came across these words by a young preacher:

“I have a hard time seeing how any action can be repeated over and over, week after week, day after day, and not lose some of its meaning...and so it is with the automatic recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. So often it seems as though we’re just *saying* it instead of *praying* it, as though the ability to say the Lord’s Prayer in one continuous breath is a primarily determining characteristic between who’s a Christian and who’s not.”

Yup, those words were mine, from 1982, my first year as a lay preacher at Balgonie and Pilot Butte, Saskatchewan, when I was launching a four-week sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer. It was probably a good thing that a couple of years later I headed to an ecumenical seminary where my Anglican, Methodist, Catholic and Lutheran friends could help me gain a deeper appreciation of ritual and set liturgy, but from way back when I do “get it” when I hear complaints that reciting this prayer by rote can be meaningless.

So where do we go from here, with this prayer and this scripture reading?

First thing to do, I think, is to look at the two gospels that contain the Lord's Prayer, and their very different settings. In the gospel of Luke, chapter 11:1-4, Jesus had just finished praying and one of the disciples requested of him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples." In response, Jesus said, "When you pray, say this:" followed by the Lord's Prayer. The Greek is simple and blunt; he's saying "pray these words" rather than "here's a pattern for prayer".

In Matthew, chapter 6, the version we're considering today, the Lord's Prayer is part of the Sermon on the Mount and it is prefaced with the words, "Pray in this manner." That gives quite a bit more latitude to say that this is a *template* for prayer, moreso than dictating specific words that must be used. But whether we follow Luke who says, "here are the words to pray" or Matthew which says, "here is your pattern for prayer," the content of the prayer describes who we are as followers of Jesus, in relation to and in relationship with the God of the ages.

Irish New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan sees the prayer being just a bit too neat and tidy in the way it summarizes the theology of Jesus, seeing here the hand of later scribes who gathered the themes of Jesus' preaching in this prayer, but Aramaic scholar Jack Kilmon disagrees, for the form and structure of this prayer looks and sounds to him very much like an oral prayer of the Aramaic language that Jesus spoke. The fact that the content of the prayer is consistent with other things that Jesus said cannot be used as an argument against its authenticity. Though I am a big fan of Crossan, I am more drawn to Kilmon's argument here, seeing in this compact prayer a gift to us from Christ, the one who invites us to new life.

While the Lord's Prayer does really deserve a sermon series, ranging from the little four-week series I gave it back in 1982 to a word-by-word series that could take a full year, a quick trip through the prayer gives a few main points:

1. **The familiar closeness** between us and God. It's not by accident that Jesus chose the word "Abba" to address God at the beginning of the prayer, which we do well to translate as "Daddy" or "Papa" rather than the more formal term "Father." We can debate why the term was masculine, for most importantly it's a term of endearment and reliance, telling us that our connection with God is the same as the relationship of a newborn who looks at their Mama and Papa as the pure embodiment of love.
2. The existence of **a God who is beyond us**. "Who art in heaven" can get tangled up in a question of location – is heaven physically up there in the universe? is it another dimension entirely? is it in my heart and my very breath? – but this also brings to mind God's self-identification back in the book of Exodus (3:14). At the burning bush, Moses pleaded with God to give him a name that he could use, to tell people about this God who was confronting him and God said, "I am who I am." God is the one who IS. God is not a projection of the people, God is not an imaginary friend shaped by us. God is, and when we take time to enter into prayer we affirm the reality of one beyond us – the Holy One, the Hallowed One, the one who IS.
3. A desire for **alignment between God's unbounded gift of love and the way we shape our lives and societies** here on earth. Here, Christ expresses with confidence that there IS an agenda bigger than my desire for an easy life where I will be rewarded for my good deeds: the big-hearted love that God shows for the lost and the least, the marginalized and the despised. Christ's God-agenda calls us back from the walls that we build – or the walls that some leaders say we should build – to the power of boundless love which we call God. It pushes me beyond the easy compromises that I make so easily, to the demand to give myself over to a life that loves and loves and loves, even when that is hard. Though expressed in the intimacy of prayer, that same intimate time with God calls me out of myself, putting the lie to any suggestion that life is primarily about defending my turf or God's turf. I look at who God is and see pure love, and that's all I really need to know in setting my agenda for my day or my life.
4. **God's deep connection to life's realities**. The daily bread on *my* table, the daily bread that *needs to be* on the table of the hungry, are things that matter to God and to God's people. The giving and receiving of forgiveness – of missteps and debts - is the hallmark of the ongoing life of Jesus in the Church and the world. The acknowledgement of temptation brings even those things we want to hide or deny into our relationship with God. All these things remind us that the

God who is, has cared enough about our real-life struggles to enter into them through the gift of Jesus Christ.

When we come together in worship – when we gather as Christians in other settings – in the prayer life of our self and our household – these points of prayer call us to go deep with God to enliven our outreach to the world. These words remind us that nothing we do is in isolation: we live our life with God, in concert with all people who celebrate intimate connection to the God of love, calling me out of myself, and into my best self. Whether these are THE words you use in your quiet times with God, or a *pattern* for your relationship with the Divine and the times we set aside to meditate, contemplate, and make ourselves vulnerable before God, we are called to intentionally place our lives in the context of God’s amazing, challenging, fearless love.

At the risk of tacking on an additional mini-sermon, I would be remiss if I did not take a few moments this morning to consider this prayer within its gospel setting in the book of Matthew. As I mentioned earlier, while Luke sets the Lord’s Prayer as a reply to the request, “Lord, teach us to pray”, in Matthew it is placed within the sermon on the Mount and that placement reminds us of the integrity we are called to have as Christians.

Immediately before the prayer, Jesus says this: “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites who draw attention to their pious prayers, for whatever praise they get for their piety is all they’re going to get, for God certainly doesn’t care about their big show of devotion. Instead, set aside a quiet time and place where you can open yourself to God.” He then goes on to offer the words of the Lord’s Prayer as a way to keep us brief and on track, focusing our prayers rather than going on and on with fancy words.

A key word here is hypocrite. While used, within the Church and especially by those who have left the Church, as a favourite accusatory word for *anyone else* whose actions do not live up to their words, Professor Matt Skinner reminds us that the word *Hypocrite* was the Greek word for a stage actor, who would hide their true selves behind masks that conveyed a false identity. The key, then, in our religious life, is to be an authentic, consistent person of love, not a person whose selfish ambitions are hidden by sweet words and pious, empty prayers.

If we go back three more verses to the beginning of today’s gospel reading, it’s not just prayer that gets this treatment by Jesus. “Beware of practicing your righteousness before others to be noticed by them” he says, “so when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you...but give in secret, where only God will see what you’re doing.” His warnings about showy prayers and his warnings about showy acts of charity are nearly identical, and it’s in THAT context that he offers the Lord’s Prayer to those who follow in his way. Our prayer life is the soil that supports us as our outreach in Christ’s name grows and flourishes, our outreach to others is a tangible expression of God’s love, and all of it is done with humility and integrity. What we say and what we do, what we pray and how we act, are all part of the same thing, all part of who we were created to be by a God who loves us and all our sisters and brothers, more deeply than we can possibly imagine.

And so we pray – in private, and when we gather. We give – as open, generous households, as a congregation and denomination committed to justice and inclusion, and when there’s a public aspect to that it’s only to encourage others in their journeys toward generosity. We live – as recipients of this great gift of life, as a living testimonial to the hope that God’s way of love may someday be adopted in fullness by every person and every people of the world, as those who believe in the power of Jesus Christ to save us from selfishness by opening to us a way that is abundant now and evermore. And we praise – thankful for the words of the Lord’s Prayer, thankful for the relationships it describes and prescribes, and thankful for the opportunity of each word and action to express our commitment to God’s ways of love and forgiveness and life. Thanks be to God, Amen.

References cited: © Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, 2016.

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