

Wesley United Methodist Church  
Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
Title: Abba, Our Father  
Text: Romans 8:15-17  
Matthew 6:7-14

Have you ever had an experience like this? You are in church and it is time to say the Lord's Prayer. Between your words and your thoughts, has it ever gone something like this:

"Our Farther, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name ... *(oh, yes, I must remember to pick up some salad dressing on the way home from church)* ... thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven ... *(Maybe I should add some croutons and bacon to my list)* .... Give us this day our daily bread .... *(Bread, I forgot bread)* ... and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us .... *(Maybe I should invite Tom and Mary over, but he'll probably want to watch football)* ... and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil ... *(It's sad, Fred's not bothering to iron his shirts since Jane died)* ... For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."<sup>i</sup>

Probably if we are honest with ourselves, most of us have had a similar experience. When we repeat the same words many times, they become automatic and we can say them without thinking about what we are saying. When we pray the Lord's Prayer in a worship setting, we are all saying the words together and the familiarity of the words not only makes it easy for our minds to wander, but it also means that there really is no time for us to think about what the words and phrases mean.

The Lord's Prayer is the most famous prayer in the world. It is simple and brief. It can be recited in less than 30 seconds. A four-year-old child can memorize it and most Christians know it by heart. That may be

part of the problem. It is so well known and so easily recited that most of us never even think about the words as we rattle them off.<sup>ii</sup>

I want to invite us to spend the next five weeks thinking about the words of this prayer and to try to be open to how deeper reflection might lead us into some new or renewed theological or spiritual insight. I invite each of us to commit to praying this prayer each day during the month of July, if it is not already part of your day. You might pray it as we do in our worship service, or you might allow yourself to slow down and reflect upon the words you are saying and ask God to speak to you during this time.

Today, we focus on the first ten words of the prayer. “Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name.” As I said, this prayer can be learned by young children, and the story is told of a child who trying to make sense of the words said the first part this way: “Our Father, witches are in heaven. Harold be thy name.” That does tend to lend a different meaning to the words.

As we begin reflecting upon this prayer, we do need to realize that we are not saying this prayer exactly the way that Jesus taught his disciples. The versions found in Matthew’s and Luke’s gospel are slightly different, and depending upon the translation we use, we will find other differences. The reality is that the prayer as we find it in our Bibles has gone through a variety of translations. Please indulge me for a minute for a brief history review.

Jesus and his disciples spoke Aramaic. The New Testament was originally written in Greek (so the words had already been translated once), then the Greek was translated into Latin, and finally in 1382 John Wickliffe used the Greek and Latin versions to translate the Bible into English. The institutional church was very unhappy with him and his translation was

mostly rejected. Before 1541, there was no single way to say the Lord's Prayer in the churches of England. After separating from the Roman Catholic Church, King Henry VIII issued an edict telling people exactly what words to use to say the prayer. In 1604, King James commissioned an official English version of the Bible that we know as the King James Version. This led to the way many say the Lord's Prayer today.<sup>iii</sup>

The prayer that Jesus taught his disciples had deep Jewish roots, and is very similar to a prayer Jewish people called the "Kaddish". It is probably close to the way that Isaiah, David and others prayed. When we pray this prayer, we are connected with a great cloud of saints, many of whom lived long before Jesus.<sup>iv</sup>

One of the important Jewish customs is that the name of God is never to be spoken or written. God is Almighty, majestic, holy. Jesus continues that custom by saying, "Hallowed (or holy) be thy name" but before that, in this prayer, Jesus taught his disciples to speak to God as "Our Father".

There is an important thing to note about the Lord's Prayer. All of the pronouns related to the person or persons praying are plural. There is no "me, my, or mine" in this prayer. Everything is communal. That doesn't mean that there may not be times when we need the prayer to be so personal that we might choose to use "me" rather than "us", but it is important to remember that this is a community prayer as is true for most Jewish prayers. – and remember that Jesus was Jewish.

That reminds us that whatever situation we are facing, is not something we face alone, but something that all of us can understand, may have experienced, or can face together.

While affirming that God is holy, Jesus begins this prayer with “Our Father”. Not only his father, but ours – all of us. Not only a God who is almighty, majestic, holy, but a God who is in relationship with us, a God close enough to us to be called Father, or “Abba” – which may be more like the modern name “Daddy”.

If you think back or ahead to Advent and preparation for Christmas, you may recall that the angel’s words to Joseph, were that the baby was to be named “Emmanuel” which means “God with us.” In Jesus’ life, presence, teaching he introduced us to the reality that God even though God is almighty, majestic, holy, to be revered and honored, far beyond any words that we can use, God is also as close to us as a Father, Mother, Parent, Sibling, Best Friend.

God is in relationship with us. God is among us, around us, within us.

This was, I believe, a radical idea for Jesus’ followers at the time.

For us it opens amazing possibilities as well as challenges. It means that we can come to God just as we would come to a loving father. We can share our deepest fears. We can share our successes and our failures, our celebrations and our concerns as we do in worship together. We can talk to God about whatever is on our mind. There is no subject that is off limits.

As wonderful as this may be, for some the idea of God as father can be a problem. There are too many people for whom their earthly father or mother was not a person of love, but rather a harsh critic, or an abuser, or was absent. The challenge is that we must not get caught up in our personal experience of earthly parents and project that on to God. There are people who do exactly that and experience God as the great and powerful judge just waiting to catch us doing something wrong, or at the other extreme, as completely absent, non-existent.

It is a challenge to not be limited by our human relationships as we enter, or grow, in our relationship with God. Ultimately, God is neither male nor female. God is not human; but in our limited humanity, we need images or ways to think about and words to describe God. One of the very powerful images for many is the one that Jesus gave here of God as Father, or perhaps for some Mother, or Parent.

A friend of mine who was abused by her earthly father, found that for her, rather than the image of God as Father being negative it was powerful, because she saw God as the image of the Father that she never had and always wanted.

The important thing here, I think, is not the particular word Father, but rather the image that Jesus has given us of God in relationship with us – caring for us, loving us – each one of us, personally and all of us together.

At the same time that we are being encouraged to think of God as being in close relationship with us, we are also quickly reminded that God is Holy, “Hallowed be thy name.”

The Greek word for “father” has more depth to it than our English word. It means the “originator of life”. When we think of God as Holy, this is the time to also think of God as the “originator of life” – all life. This is the time to think of God as Creator of all that is good and majestic.

One of my favorite things to do is to sit or walk by the ocean. I particularly love to do this when there are very few people around. I watch the waves and at first, I give thanks to God for those wonderful waves that are there just for me to enjoy. Of course, then I have to get out of my self-centeredness and remember that those waves were there before I came and will be there after I leave. Those waves will be lapping against the

shore or smashing against the rocks in the middle of the night when no one is there to see them.

That's when I will typically start singing silently, or aloud (if I'm alone). I sing songs about God's majestic, wonder, greatness. I become overwhelmed with how great God is and how majestic this world is and I truly worship. This can also be my experience in the mountains.

We are in the amazing and incredible reality of being able to know that God is "both – and". God is both the God who cares for each of us intimately, and also the God who created all that is around us. God is both nearer to us than we are to ourselves and also transcendent – beyond any words that we can use to describe God.

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name."

Don Underwood, a United Methodist Pastor in Texas, wrote a little book called "Pray Like Jesus". He reminds us that the Lord's prayer is rich in spiritual guidance for nearly every personality. It is a prayer for contemplatives who are searching for a deeper spiritual life. It is a prayer for people who are passionate about social justice. It is a prayer for those who are seeking the strength to simply make it through another day.<sup>v</sup>

We will get to all of that in the weeks to come. For today, the beginning of the prayer is more about searching for a deeper spiritual life. It is about naming and claiming both that God is real, and wants a personal relationship with us, as well as God being transcendent, beyond any words that we can describe.

During this week, I encourage you to pray the Lord's Prayer each day, but I also encourage you to spend time with those first words. Think about what it means to pray "Our Father" – not just my God, but God of all peoples – involved in our everyday lives. "Who art in heaven" –

Transcendent – beyond the norm and experience of our everyday lives.

Both – And. “Hallowed be thy name.”

“God’s creative power and unlimited love are beyond the full comprehension or experience of humans.”<sup>vi</sup>

Take time to be grateful for the fact that God sees the suffering and violence of the world and that God also knows about your personal fears and insecurities. Give thanks that the God who created the ocean and the mountains is the same God who is able to bring resurrection out of death and hope out of despair.<sup>vii</sup>

“Our Father, Who Art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name.”

Amen.

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<sup>ii</sup> Meier, Paul W. The Lord’s Prayer, Finding New Meaning within the Language Jesus Spoke Introduction, loc. 42

Note: This has been slightly edited to substitute trespasses for debts consistent with the tradition in this congregation.

<sup>ii</sup> Underwood Don Pray Like Jesus, Loc. 74

<sup>iii</sup> Meier, loc. 112-128

<sup>iv</sup> Meier, loc. 132-141

<sup>v</sup> Underwood, Loc. 82

<sup>vi</sup> Underwood, Loc. 183

<sup>vii</sup> Underwood, Loc. 211