

Sermon for July 24, 2022

The Lord's Prayer

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you,  
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

In this morning's Gospel of Luke, we heard that:

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples  
said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them,

"When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

We all recognize this as the Lord's Prayer. It is also known as the Our Father or in  
Latin the *Pater Noster*. There is another longer version of this prayer in Matthew's  
Gospel, which is given by Jesus as part of his Sermon on the Mount. Scholars  
disagree about which of these two versions is the “original.” In **our** tradition, as in  
almost all liturgical traditions, the Matthew version is the one we normally use.  
This prayer was originally written in Greek, then later translated into Latin, and  
eventually into English and many other languages.

Where did Jesus come up with this prayer? There is some speculation that it

derives from an ancient Hebrew prayer, the Shema Israel—or Sh'ma Yisrael as I am told it is pronounced. The book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 6 Verse 4, begins, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” Moses speaks to the Israelites and teaches them what God has told him about how to pray and worship. Likewise, Jesus tells his disciples to pray boldly, that is to speak the prayer aloud and with confidence.

The prayer begins, “Our Father.” Not “my father” or “your father,” but “our father.” Jesus states that God is not only **his** father—his *Abba*—but the father of everyone. The father presides over the family unit. It is a prayer of community, one that is recited together. It is also a prayer of intimacy. The use of the pronoun “thy” is the familiar form of the word “you,” a grammatical form we have lost in modern English. I first became aware of this detail when I learned the French version—*Notre Pere*—in school. Everyone who studies French quickly learns the difference between “vous,” the formal or polite form of address, and “tu,” which one uses with friends, family, and—as my first French teacher taught us—with animals. Jesus addresses God in this very intimate manner.

Actually, Jesus addressing God as “father” is a pretty radical concept! In the Hebrew Scriptures God is referred to as father only in a very few instances. The fact that the earliest texts kept the Aramaic word “*Abba*” instead of the Greek “*Pater*” shows how unusual this is, even though later versions used *Pater*, which was kept in Latin translations. This reinforces the idea of an intimate relationship between God and humans, which is central to Jesus’s message.

“Who art in heaven.” God lives in a different place than we do. The father in heaven that Jesus addresses is very different from the fathers on earth.

Both Matthew’s and Luke’s prayers include a series of petitions.

The first petition is “Hallowed be your name.” The New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine reminds us that the sanctity of God’s name is a common theme in the Hebrew Scriptures. God’s name is holy. It is meant to inspire awe and reverence. It is not meant to be trivialized or to be used as an insult.

The Archbishop of Canterbury Rowen Williams said, “Understand what you're talking about when you're talking about God, this is serious, this is the most wonderful and frightening reality that we could imagine, more wonderful and frightening than we **can** imagine.”

In many Jewish temples and synagogues, there is a maxim that appears: “Know before whom you stand.”

The second petition: “Your Kingdom come.” The Kingdom of God was often mentioned in Hebrew Scripture and prayers. Jesus does not define what God’s kingdom is, but it is likely his disciples would understand the concept.

The third petition: “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” This sentence is absent from the Luke gospel we heard today, but some scholars believe it was actually included. John Ortberg, an American evangelical preacher, interprets this as God's invitation to "join him in making things down here the way they are up there.”

The fourth petition: “Give us this day our daily bread.” As commonplace and banal as this phrase sounds, there is an astounding amount of scholarship written on it. The Greek phrase *ἐπιούσιος ἄρτος* is translated as “daily bread.” It can also connote “for the coming day” or “for the days ahead.” But this word *ἐπιούσιος* is very rare, and is found no where else in any Greek texts except for the Lord’s

Prayer in Matthew and Luke. Whatever its significance, this fourth petition is interpreted as asking God to provide us with whatever physical needs we have in order to exist.

The fifth petition: “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” The Matthew version reads, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” The word for “debt” in Greek *ὀφειλήματα* does not necessarily refer to financial debts, but to moral debts as well. In Aramaic the word is translated as either debt or sin. The word “trespass” had the archaic meaning of any sin or offense. In English the words “sins,” “debts,” and “trespasses” are used as synonyms and interchangeably. If we are forgiven, we are able to forgive; if we are loved, we are able to love.

The sixth petition: “And do not bring us to the time of trial,” we also know as: “And lead us not into temptation.” The Greek word here is *πειρασμός*, which can be translated as either temptation, testing, trial, or experiment. The big theological question here is whether God “brings us” or “leads us” to temptation, or whether we literally fall into it on our own. Every religious scholar, from Carl Jung, to Joseph Smith, to Pope Francis, has weighed in on it. Henry Nouwen had much to say about temptation, calling it *The Lure of Upward Mobility*.

In the Hebrew Scriptures we learned that God tested Abraham and then Job in ways that seem horribly cruel to our modern sensibilities. And we know from the New Testament that God tempted Jesus and later his disciples. Perhaps because Jesus also had the experience of being tempted, he is able to help other people struggling against the same problems. To me, it sounds like Jesus is beseeching God “please just don’t do that any more.”

The seventh petition: “But deliver us from evil.” Again this phrase is absent from Luke but present in Matthew. And there are various scholarly opinions as to whether “evil” is a generic term or refers to “the evil one.” In Aramaic there are no references the devil as “the evil one” so it is likely this interpretation was added later.

The prayer we recite concludes with a doxology, which is an expression of praise to God: “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.” This doxology is not present in ancient Greek manuscripts, and is not mentioned in the early commentaries. The use of the doxology in English translations dates at least from at least the 1549 Prayer Book, which was heavily influenced by William Tyndale's New Testament translation of 1526. The doxology appears in the Anglican 1662 Prayer Book, but it is only included in some services but not Morning and Evening Prayer. The Roman rite never included a doxology.

So what is the significance of the Lord’s Prayer? Why is it important? I was taught the Lord’s Prayer and we recited it every day in public elementary school, as did millions of kids around the country, until the Supreme Court banned mandatory school prayer in 1962. It is recited today as part of every Christian church service and many non-denominational services.

All of the earliest church fathers—Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, Augustine, John Chrysostom— wrote about the Lord’s Prayer. And most of the later church scholars —Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, John Wesley, Karl Barth, Simone Weil, and Raymond Brown—also wrote about it.

It is known that the Lord’s Prayer—in one form or another—was translated into many languages long before the Bible was translated. In fact, various translations

were collected as early as the 1500's and were used to compare different languages because it was the only existing text which had been translated into so many languages.

Why was this particular prayer used so frequently above all other Scripture passages? In a manner of speaking, in this short set of phrases, Jesus is able to sum up everything that God wants us to do, both in terms of our relationship with God and also with one another. So you might ask: isn't that pretty much what the Ten Commandments did? God gave the tablets to Moses, which listed commandments in two sections: how we must behave toward God, and how we must interact with each other.

But this prayer is one that comes directly from Jesus himself. It puts everything into a neat package, one that we can say every day: with our families, in our schools, as part of our liturgies, or just with any other faithful people we know. It is easy to memorize, and it contains everything we need to lead a godly and righteous life.

For me, having memorized this prayer at a young age, it has remained with me all my life. I recited it over the years, even during the times when I did not consider myself religious and was not affiliated with any church. For much of that time, I recited in a rote manner, as we often do, without really thinking about its meaning. But as I was doing the research for this sermon, in breaking the prayer down into its different components, and by delving into its history and meaning, the prayer took on an even greater significance.

The Lord's Prayer makes our Christian faith a shared communal experience, not an isolated one. And whenever we pray, either alone or in with others, God hears us.

The Lord's Prayer is not limited just to Jesus's disciples and their prayer life, but brings significance to all cultures and all times.

Amen.