

Trinity United Methodist Church

February 7, 2021

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Matthew 6:5-15

“And when you pray, do not keep babbling like pagans, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. This, then, is how you should pray:

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

So we begin a new sermon series today on the Lord’s Prayer, and it will take us into the season of Lent, a time in which we typically focus on renewing our spiritual disciplines, of which prayer is probably the chief amongst them.

And I don’t know about you, but when left to my own devices and I think about how I typically pray, especially in today’s world where there is no shortage of need, even before the pandemic hit and especially now that we have been in this time of pandemic and all the ensuing things and craziness that has been going on over the last year, there is so much need it’s tempting just to jump right into our prayer list right off the bat. To pray for ourselves and pray for others. And at some point I jump into that – again, left to my own devices, if I just start praying – and then it jogs my memory and I go, “Oh, yeah, right, and please forgive me for that thought I had the other day, that thing I did the other day, snapping at my kid when I should have kept my cool,” whatever the case might be. Because we remember that God is holy, and so God hears the prayers of the righteous, so, “Oh yeah, let me pray for forgiveness, and then God will hear my laundry list of prayer requests.”

And then typically at the end of a time of prayer, *if* I've got a little bit of time left, *then* I'll get around to simply praising God and honoring God. But more often than not, I'll admit, it usually ends up, "Love you, Jesus. Amen." And go on with the day.

J.D. Walt is a pastor and author, seminary professor as well. He writes daily devotions called *The Daily Text* that you might get through Seedbed. And he puts together books of the devotions after he goes through them by e-mail. And he's got one called *Right Here, Right Now, Jesus*. And he points out, as he begins talking about The Lord's Prayer, that our typical patterns of prayer fall into Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Now, I know all of us here are good "edumacated" people, so maybe you might remember that pyramid from school, where our needs are based on this pyramid scheme. The base of the pyramid, the biggest need, are physical needs. Air and water and food and such, things that we cannot live without. The next level up is security, our need for safety and shelter and stability. The next level up is social; our need for belonging and being loved and being included and accepted. Then fourthly, as we're getting toward the top of that pyramid, are the needs of ego, of self-esteem or power, or what I would describe as agency, that we're not just helpless. We do have power within our means, to do something about our situation. The need to be recognized. And then at the very tip of the pyramid itself, the need for self-actualization. The need for finding meaning, for living for a larger purpose.

And of course, the idea is that we can't begin to talk to people about living with a sense of purpose without ensuring that their physical needs are met. I encounter this so many times when I've been in mission work. A lot of times in mission work we do things like building shelter, right? Because maybe a storm knocked out housing and things of that nature. And many times in those types of mission trips, there's always at least that one person that gets something under their craw about, "But we're not converting these people to Jesus!" Well, we are in a way, because we can't talk to these people about believing in Jesus while it's still literally raining on their heads, right? So through the process of building, it is truly all about people and not about the project. But through meeting those basic needs, we're able to talk to them about their higher needs.

J.D. points out that the Lord's Prayer fits into Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and can help us out. When we pray, "Give us today our daily bread," we're praying for those physical needs for provision. When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," we're praying for security, for protection. When we pray, "Forgive us our debts," or "trespasses," "as we forgive those who trespass, as we forgive our debtors," we're praying for peace in our social relationships. When we pray, "Holy is your name," we're getting into those higher levels of ego. And then when we finally pray, "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done," Your will, not mine, we're praying in that level of self-actualization, of purpose.

Now, to be sure – let me add the caveat – there is no *right way* to pray. Prayer at its simplest is simply talking with God, talking with Jesus, like we would with a friend or a loved one. In fact, I've shared with you many times my prayers begin with "What's up?" Sometimes in my own prayer life I actually imagine Jesus sitting there in the room with me, and I talk to Jesus. And on my better days, I stop long enough to hear what Jesus might want to say back to me, sometimes. And hey, especially when you're ADD like me, it's helpful to focus in that kind of a way in your prayer time. You might give that a try.

But there is no right formula when it comes to praying. There are no magic words. There is no particular "status" that you have for your prayer to be heard over and above others. Some people think that the pastor's prayers somehow matter more than a layperson's prayers, and nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, I've shared before that it bugs me to no end at family gatherings when, ever since I became a pastor, it's like everyone else who used to pray the blessing before the meals *forgot how to pray*. As if, "Well, Daniel's the professional now. We want him to pray instead." I mean, I don't *mind* doing it, but it just strikes me as funny.

Nevertheless, we have this teaching from Jesus on how He would have us to pray. In Luke's gospel, the disciples actually ask him, "Lord, teach us to pray." They ask him as their rabbi, as any good disciple would do. Each rabbi has their own particular take on prayer. Think of it this way: You might know how to cook, and you might do a pretty doggone decent job, a good job of cooking. But if Gordon Ramsey were to show up in your kitchen one day, wouldn't you want him to show you a thing or two, to improve your cooking even more? It's like that with Jesus.

In Matthew's gospel is the Sermon on the Mount, his premiere teaching about simply how to be a disciple, how to be a kingdom-minded person, how to be a person of covenant, like we've been talking about. And prayer is that foundation from which all else is built.

So Jesus says, "When you pray, pray like this: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Holy is Your Name.'" We might note first that Jesus doesn't start where Maslow started, where we might start, with all of our needs and wants and preferences, although those are important. The focus is first on God. God the Father. The word that Jesus uses is the Aramaic, Hebrew word for Daddy, which is Abba, a term of intimacy. Rather than, "Father, may I..." it's "Daddy..."

A good friend of mine who has graduated into glory used to pray, "Papa God." And of course we acknowledge that this Father language are words that are fraught with baggage in our modern times. But it dawned on me, really throughout all of history, because throughout all of history, not all dads have been swell, right? There have been

some pretty bad ones. But especially in our modern times, we're mindful of those who have had negative relationships with their earthly fathers, or perhaps none at all. But I love what J.D. Walt, again, says about this. He points out that the roles of father and mother are really spiritual roles when it comes down to it. Just because we all do have a male progenitor, the role of father or mother is a spiritual one, especially for those of us with Christian faith. It's how any of us can be that guiding and nurturing influence in someone else's life, particularly a young person's life that we know, and not be biologically related to them.

And I've had what I've considered to be spiritual fathers and mothers, and especially grandmothers. In fact, it dawned on me just this morning that my own Mema – I know that I am where I am today as a result of my Mema's prayers for me above all else. And how she's not just my actual grandmother, but she's also spiritually my Mema.

And it goes to say that God is beyond gender, though the Bible overwhelmingly and especially Jesus uses the term "Father;" there are instances where the Bible talks about God's characteristics of nurturing, an attribute that we might especially associate with motherhood also.

The greater point of all this: So many people – I've found it especially in seminary, wanting to use inclusive language. Using inclusive language is important to include all people, but if we get hung up on this stuff we forget that the greater point is that this way of praying that Jesus teaches doesn't begin with the focus on "me, myself and I." No, the focus is on God. Jesus flips Maslow's hierarchy on its head.

And this Father language also indicates a relationship aspect to God. We're not deists like many of our founding fathers actually were. We believe in a God who wants relationship with us. Where God has descended and wants to be with us. Not just in some sentimental way, though. Because Jesus, remember, is Jewish. He's a rabbi. And remember that Jesus doesn't make sense without what? *The Old Testament*. Jesus didn't just show up out of nowhere, clear out of the blue, "Hey, look! I'm God, y'all!" *Jesus doesn't make sense without the Old Testament, out of which our faith arises.*

And so Jesus is always pointing us backward. As a Jewish rabbi, He's always pointing us backward to that salvation history of faith that begins in the earliest pages of Genesis. When the people of Israel are called by God "my people," "my children." When God instructs Moses to tell Pharaoh, "God says, Let my people, let my children go." So to call God "Father" is to remember all of the things that God has done for us from ancient years of old, like delivering us from slavery to sin and death; words that we use when we celebrate Holy Communion together.

To call God "Father" reminds us that we're people of freedom. That God has set us free and God will set us free again and again. It's a relationship that goes even

deeper in the Psalms, like in Psalm 2, where the king on David's throne is called God's Son. Jesus is that long-awaited, final king to sit on David's throne. So he is God's Son, but the inheritance doesn't stop there. Because Paul tells us how, through the mystery of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is in us and we are in Christ, and therefore the inheritance is ours as well. Whoever truly believes in Jesus and follows Jesus is just as much a child of God as the children of Israel long ago.

And so to call God "Our Father," yes, is intimate. An intimate addressing of God. But it's not as casual as some might perceive. We do so with this rich memory, with a deep appreciation for receiving what we have not earned. With graciousness and gratitude.

If you've seen Downton Abbey, it's like the attitude of Lord Grantham. When everyone else around him throughout that whole series is just perpetually bugging him, "Why can't you just change the legal stuff so that the estate will go to your oldest daughter, Mary, no matter what?" He says, "I would love to do that. However, I've also got this deep appreciation of the inheritance that I received from long ago, of stewarding that which I did not build. Of maintaining that which was handed down to me." It's the same way with our faith and our relationship with God as well.

We pray, "Our Father, who is in heaven," and we think easily that that's some far-away place. Again, that God is a clockmaker who sets things in motion and just watches from afar. But remember that God chose always to descend to us from the garden, when He walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening. To the tabernacle, where he dwelt in the midst of His people. And then as the tabernacle became permanent, in the temple in Jerusalem. And then finally, in the person of Jesus and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, God continually brings heaven down to us. That's what Wesley taught about Holy Communion, that prime moment when God descends to us and we fellowship at the table with Him.

We pray, "Hallowed be Thy name." May Your Name be honored. May Your Name be holy. It's part of that reminder that this is not a casual relationship, but it has deep meaning and gravity, because nothing impure is allowed into God's presence. In the Holy of Holies, where God literally dwelt, in that inner sanctum, in that inner room, the priest who was chosen to go in had to purify themselves in all kinds of ways with all kinds of rituals and traditions and sacrifices. And even then, as that priest would enter into that room, the others would tie a rope around one of the ankles, and they would listen closely from the outside of the curtain. And if they heard a "thud," they would be able to drag the priest back out, because of the overwhelming presence of the holiness of God that he'd either passed out or died, sometimes.

It's easy with modern ears to think, "What's up with that? What's up with all that tradition and ritual and everything else? If that happened today, why couldn't the crew just go in and get them?" It's not about us. It's about the presence, the holiness of God.

So how on earth, if we have this relationship with God but we dare enter into His presence, how does that happen? It's a sermon for later in the series.

For now, how's your relationship with your Father? Your spiritual Father? Your Father in heaven. Not in some distant, faraway place, but right beside you. Right within you, even now.

Jesus told all kinds of parables, examples of what the Father is like. Telling, "Which of you, if your child asks for bread, gives him a stone, or asks for something else, gives him a serpent? If you who know how to do good to your children do that, then how much better does the Father do to you?" He even uses the example of the unjust judge who refuses to hear the widow out, but the widow in her persistence pleads and pleads and pleads. It reminds me of the child who, over and over, "Mom. Mom. Mom. Mom. Mom. Mom." Right? And even the dads go, "Fine, we give in." And if that unjust judge hears that out because of persistence, how much more is God, the Father, ready to hear us when we pray?

And of course, the most famous of all, in Luke chapter 15, the story of the prodigal son. I think most of us here know that well. The younger son demands his inheritance early. He squanders it. He doesn't get that concept, that gravitas of the inheritance that is his. He thinks of it simply as money, and he demands it and he spends it lavishly. He runs out – way too much money at the end of the money. And he wanders back home, trying to be a slave. The father sees him coming and runs out to meet him in a way that culturally, no upstanding, gentrified father would do. The protocol said, "Nope. I'm waiting. You come to me." But instead, the father would have had to hike up his robe, exposed his – *gasp* – ankles, maybe his knees even – as he ran out to his son, throwing all caution, all culture to the wind in order to receive his wayward son back home.

More recently I've come to understand that this story is less prodigal son and more prodigal father. Extravagant with love, freely giving with his love. And even to the older son who stayed home. Maybe you identify with him instead; the father still wants us to come in and join the party.

That's the kind of Father we have. The kind of Father who is always waiting for us to come in, to come home, to join the party. That's the kind of Father we have.

Thanks be to God. Amen.