

“THE LORD’S PRAYER – PRAYING TO WHOM?”

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Matthew 6:9, Hebrews 4:14-16

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Do you remember the first time you prayed the Lord’s Prayer? If you’ve regularly attended church through your life, let’s say you’re 70 years old, which isn’t too much off the average age of a Presbyterian Church goer these days, and let’s say that you’ve attended worship for around 50 of those years, with an average of 40 weeks a year in church. Most churches I know, at least the Presbyterian ones, incorporate the Lord’s Prayer into worship in some fashion, **so that would mean that you may have prayed the Lord’s Prayer at least 2000 times.** Some of you may have prayed it at school daily before prayer was removed from public schools and that would take the number way up. And others may have prayed the prayer as part of your daily prayer life. What I want to get at is that many of us are very familiar with the Lord’s Prayer, even if the version we use changes from time to time and we shift from trespasses to sins to debts.

But how intentionally have you really considered the words of the prayer? I’m using a resource for this sermon series called, ***“Lord, Teach Us – the Lord’s Prayer and the Christian Life.”*** It’s written by Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, who used to teach together at Duke University. Some of you will remember that Will Willimon preached here at RPC a few years back and how engaging he is as a preacher and teacher. In that book they state that, “in Jesus of Nazareth, God has intruded among us in a spectacularly weird and peculiarly wonderful way. Like most wonderful things in our lives, God being with us creates an oddness – **indeed we become odd as we respond to Jesus because, in the world’s eyes, Jesus is odd. Don’t pray this prayer if you don’t want to be odd.**”¹ As we look more intentionally and intensely at this prayer, I suspect we will discover many things we never suspected or understood and we may come to realize just how correct Willimon and Hauerwas are when they say, don’t pray this prayer if you don’t want to be odd!

Let’s begin at the beginning. Who is this God to whom we pray? The prayer starts with these two words, **Our Father.** In some Christian traditions that’s what the prayer is called, the Our Father. I know that most people will be drawn to the second word of that short phrase, Father. Through the centuries that depiction of God as Father has been the source of much comfort, strength and confidence, as well as a growing realization that for many, the image of God as a father is problematic, due to the fact that the language can perpetuate an unhelpful stereotype of God as biologically male when we know that God is spirit and that both male and female are created in God’s image. It also doesn’t help that for too many people, the word father doesn’t bring up happy or comforting thoughts, but rather abusive, anxious ones, or even just absence.

¹ Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, “Lord, Teach us to Pray.” p.15

We will see that this challenge around the language of Father in the prayer mainly revolves around our usual tendency to make prayer about ourselves, not about God, but before we get there, we need to look more closely at the first word of the prayer, “Our.” When we use the word “our,” we tend to understand it in the possessive sense, it’s ours, it belongs to us. But in the way Jesus tells us to pray, “our” doesn’t mean belonging to us but rather the exact opposite, **that we belong to God**. We belong to God because God has taken the initiative and has chosen to become our God.

Left to our own devices, we would not have chosen God. The problem in the God-human relationships is that humans chose to break faith with God. The solution to the problem is that God has chosen to reconcile us to God, to redeem this relationship by choosing to be our God, even when we have chosen to break with God. God chooses us, God chooses to love us, to forgive us, to redeem us, to reconcile us to God, to restore us. **This is called grace.**² We are able to pray, Our Father, because God has chosen to be our God. **God doesn’t belong to us, we belong to God, and that’s a good thing.**

But the word “our” has other implications. Note that Jesus didn’t tell us to pray to **My** Father but **Our** Father. We don’t pray in isolation, our faith isn’t lived out in isolation. We are created for others, in community. The image of God isn’t male or female, but both together. Our faith is inherently communal. Think of the language of faith, the imagery of faith. God is our God and we are God’s people. Israel is God’s chosen people. Jesus calls disciples, not one, but many and the disciples who follow Jesus, the church is called the body of Christ, made up of many parts but for the sake of unity. The truth is that though we may speak of a personal relationship with Jesus, **our faith, while personal, is never private.**³ **We don’t pray to My Father, but to Our Father.**

Now, let’s talk about that next word, Father. As Willimon and Hauerwas see it, the issue here is that we think the word Father is a description of our relationship with God, when it more accurately is the description of Jesus’ relationship with God. As the authors put it in the book, in calling God Father, we are speaking first and foremost about Jesus’ relationship to God, not our own. **That is to say, God is called Father because we have come to know Jesus as the Son.** “Father” and “Son” is the way we have been taught to name a certain relationship within the inner life of God.⁴

When we pray this prayer, the word Father isn’t about a male God but more about a sense of family. Again, here is this sense of collectiveness, community, family. To pray Our Father is to reinforce this very odd belief that the family of the church, the family of God’s people, takes precedence even over our biological families. How many times have you thought of that

² ibid. p.27

³ ibid, p.27

⁴ ibid, p.29

whenever you've prayed the Lord's Prayer? I'm thinking, probably not too often, if at all. **I think you get a sense of why Willimon and Hauerwas say that you shouldn't be praying this prayer if you don't want to be odd.**

Who do we pray to? We pray to Our Father... **in heaven.** I don't know whether you've ever put a lot of thought into where exactly this heaven is that God is supposed to be in? One thing seems clear, if God is in heaven, God is somewhere besides just in our head or in our hearts. Why is that important? Because the God we pray to needs to be a big God, a God of cosmic proportions, a God who actually creates and rules the cosmos. It won't do to pray to a God who only lives in our hearts as warm and fuzzy feeling, perhaps a leftover of that pizza from last night, or an intellectual or philosophical proposition floating around in our head, the first mover, the one who is before all else, and so on. No, God better be bigger than what we can imagine or have the capacity to grasp.

Willimon and Hauerwas write that **things are cosmically out of hand, that evil isn't just the nasty little things we do to one another. It's as if evil is organized, massive, subtle, deep, cosmic.**⁵ And if it's true that things are cosmically out of hand, it's going to take way more than a God of my making, confined to my head or my heart, to do something about it. Because we pray to a God in heaven, we pray to a God of cosmic dimensions, not only cosmic dimension, but a God who created the cosmos in the first place.

There's a difference between saying God is everywhere and God is somewhere. It's an important distinction. To say God is everywhere seems to me to be a dilution of God to a theme or an ambience, background. **If God is everywhere, then God is really nowhere.** But we believe that God is somewhere, in places like the covenant with God's people, like a voice appearing to Abraham or Jacob or Moses or David. God is present in the prophets and finally, God is present in Jesus of Nazareth, in the baptism and at the Table of our Lord. **Willimon and Hauerwas write that God can be located in such places because our God is Lord of all God has made. Heaven is the name given to God's realm.**⁶

We pray to such a God, to Our Father in heaven, a God who is Creator and Ruler, untameable, not able to be domesticated by any of our plans or our small minds. Our Father in heaven isn't confined to human hearts or heads, our homes or our churches, not even to our personal relationships with Jesus. Yes, God is there, but God is so much more. The words of the well-known hymn say it beautifully. **Crown him the Lord of years, the potentate of time, creator of the rolling spheres, ineffably sublime.** And the author of Hebrews sums it up this way; ***"Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been***

⁵ *ibid*, p.34

⁶ *ibid*, p.35

tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Who do we pray to when we pray the Lord's Prayer? We pray to Our Father in heaven. And we pray to Harold. Wait, what? Excuse me? We pray to Harold? Like Harold Zwick? One kid, when asked whether God has a name answered, sure he does, its Harold. Don't you remember, we say it every week? Our Father in heaven, Harold be your name. God indeed has a name, but we know it's not Harold (sorry Harold), it's hallowed. Hallowed be your name. **Hallowed means holy.** We pray to Our Father in heaven, whose name is holy. Remember I said last week that prayer isn't about changing our situation or circumstance as much as it's about changing us and that this change is about bending our lives toward God. One of the reasons why we pray the Lord's Prayer each week, every week, why we commit it to memory and therefore to heart, is that this bending toward God doesn't come naturally to us. **Being odd isn't something that we take to easily or quickly.**

It takes time and memory, to keep doing the same thing, sometimes even if it seems like it's just a habit, just a routine, just going through the motions, but it's more that we realize because in the saying of the prayer, in the doing of the prayer, **we bend a little every time.** Willimon and Hauerwas write that they speak of prayer as bending rather than believing **because our beliefs are derivative of our practice, our ethics is a by-product of our worship.**⁷ We come to believe as we first begin with practice, with doing. To pray that God's name is hallowed, holy, is to invite us to live into what we pray. We are to be holy because God is holy. Listen to that carefully. **Be** holy, because I am holy, says the Lord. It doesn't say think holy or imagine holy or hold onto holiness in your heart, it says **be** holy.

Our beliefs are derivative of our practice, meaning that how we live determines what we truly believe. **But our practice, our living, and especially our loving, is also derivative of God's love for us.** We learn to love, we learn to live a particularly way, this odd way of following Jesus, we learn to be holy **because God has first loved us,** God has first shown us what holiness looks like. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we know to whom we pray. We pray to Our Father in heaven, whose very name means holy. And so every time we pray our Lord's Prayer, each time we are reminded to be holy as God is holy, **whenever and wherever we try to live out the words we pray, words like holiness that are embodied for us in the life of Jesus,** in his loving his enemies, in his turning the other cheek, in his forgiveness of those who failed him and deserted him, in his sacrificial love for a creation that had broken faith with their creator, in following and living in the example of the one who first loved us, **we bend a little more toward God, toward our holy God.**

Thanks be to God, Amen!

⁷ ibid, p.22