

**Let Us Pray**  
**A Lenten Series on *The Lord's Prayer***  
**by Rev. Susan Morrison**

First Sunday of Lent  
February 25, 2007

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name.*

**Exodus 3: 13 – 15**

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is the name of that God?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And God said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebekah, and the God of Jacob and Rachel and Leah, has sent me to you': this is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations."

**Luke 11:1- 13**

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." <sup>2</sup>Jesus said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. <sup>3</sup>Give us each day our daily bread. <sup>4</sup>And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

<sup>5</sup>And Jesus said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; <sup>6</sup>for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' <sup>7</sup>And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' <sup>8</sup>I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. <sup>9</sup>"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>10</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>11</sup>Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? <sup>12</sup>Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? <sup>13</sup>If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

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"Teach us to pray" the disciples asked Jesus. And Jesus responded by linking words and phrases together in a prayer that has been known for centuries as The Lord's Prayer.

"Teach us to pray" the disciples asked Jesus. And Jesus taught them, through the words of a prayer, not merely how to pray, but how to live.

"Teach us to pray" the disciples asked Jesus. And Jesus suggested through this "prayer of all prayers" both the dangers that they would face as his disciples as well as the necessary skills they would need to fulfill their commitment.

And so I suggest to you this morning that knowing The Lord's Prayer is a little like packing your bag for a long journey, be it even a life long journey. At all times and in all places, it will help us "put on Christ" no matter what the situation, for this prayer will form us and inform us throughout this journey called discipleship.

The early church instructed new Christians by teaching them The Lord's Prayer. It helped fledgling Christians to better understand their identity. William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, to whom I'm deeply indebted for their

insights into The Lord's Prayer in their book titled *Lord, Teach Us*, suggest that learning to pray this prayer, allowing it to become second nature, takes time, but eventually it becomes "a habit." And praying The Lord's Prayer out of habit isn't such a bad idea. Habits can be very good. Most of the really important things that we do in life we do out of habit. We eat, sleep, exercise, boot up the computer, check our e mail, and hug our loved ones and our children and grandchildren out of habit. Some things in life are too important to be left up to spontaneous desire – things like telling people we love them or praying to God. So we do them "out of habit."

And since we live in a day and age where faith is so at odds with many of the deeply ingrained and widely held assumptions of culture, this "prayer habit" is critically important.

I like to think of The Lord's Prayer as an invitation to bend our lives toward God. **We pray it not to ask for what we want but rather to bend our wants toward what God wants.**

"Teach us to pray" the disciples asked Jesus. And Jesus said to them, "When you pray, say, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name." This morning I would like to reflect on the phrase "Our Father...hallowed be thy name" and next week consider "who art in heaven" when we also ponder the phrase "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

So, this morning we begin with the phrase "Our Father." The very first word in The Lord's Prayer is surprising! It speaks volumes about our Christian theology. For we are taught to pray, not as an individual, but as the church. This is not an "I" prayer: this is a "we" prayer. "*Our Father....give us this day our daily bread....forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*" It is a reminder that although we each have a personal relationship with God, it is never a private one. We are all in this together. The word "our" reminds us that Jesus calls us together as a community, to live together, to pray together, to act together as the body of Christ. Christianity is inherently communal, a matter of life in the body, the church.

Roberta Bondi in her book on The Lord's Prayer (*A Place to Pray*) takes the importance of this unity with others yet to a deeper level. She recognizes that when she prays this prayer, by virtue of her very baptism, she is praying it as part of the people of God and in return they are praying it with her. She writes about a struggle that she was having with Jane Anne, who had been a longtime close friend. But her friend had betrayed her and she felt hurt and angry. She tried praying about it but found herself praying that she could go away somewhere so that she would never have to see Jane Anne again. And then one morning, she began to pray The Lord's Prayer and found herself praying it in a new way. Writes Bondi: " 'Our Father' I heard myself say. And then immediately after that, 'my Father and the Father of Jane Anne....' " And suddenly the veil lifted and Roberta Bondi knew that she was no longer alone in a private world of anger and hurt, blinded and isolated by her own mental anguish. Rather, she found herself and Jane Anne in the presence of God and immediately, her grief and anger began to lift. She recognized that she and Jane Anne were both in the family of God by merely being human and that within that family, all things were possible. Her insights led her to a reconciliation with her friend.

And so when we pray "Our Father" let us pause and allow that "our" to become expansive, including people or groups or even our whole church community here at Holy Trinity. The "our" is the communion of saints, those who have gone before us and those in our very midst and those yet to be born who will be part of the Christian family.

And so we pray "Our Father." The "Our" is followed by the name that Jesus called God which was "Father." I have come to understand that 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 known Jesus as the Son.

Using a bible concordance, I scanned the Old Testament for the word "father." The word "father" appears hundreds of times, but almost always connoting a human relationship, referring to someone's father. Only 14 times is the word Father used to describe God and when it is used, the word is linked to God's role in salvation history.

Whereas in the New Testament, God's name is primarily that of Father and refers to the relationship between God and Jesus. To Jesus, God was his father. He called God "Abba" which is an Aramaic word connoting tenderness, love and trust. To the ancients, who developed our trinitarian faith, the terms "Father" and "Son" were not names connoting nature and essence, but names signifying a relationship. Gender was not the issue.

Sandra Schneiders in her book *Women and the Word* theorizes that because the ancient Hebrew people believed that God was personal and because they ascribed procreation responsibility solely to the male partner, their choice of Father for the first person of the trinity was logical enough. In that agrarian society, our forebears believed that just as the seed was planted in the earth, and there it grew to fullness, so the male seed was planted in the woman's womb, where it grew and became new life. The male, it was believed, contributed everything necessary to create the offspring. The woman was merely the vessel in which the unborn developed. Thus, the early church taught that God was Jesus' father and Mary's womb, the chosen vessel for the baby Jesus.

For me, the problem arises when we literalize what was intended as a relational metaphor and make God exclusively male. Now we have limited our concept of God. We anthropomorphize God when we put a human male body on God. Our God has no gender. In this morning's lesson from Exodus, when Moses asks God for God's name, God replies "I AM who I am." Another translation suggests the promise of God's name is "I will be there for you."

God is neither male nor female. God is like a father. God is like a mother. God is like the sun, like a rock, like a spring of water. God is potter, builder, shepherd, physician, midwife, judge, nursing mother, king, hero. God is love. The scriptures are filled with metaphors for God. Let us never limit our understanding of God, especially when we pray. Let us never allow our God to be too small!

After we call on God as Our Father, we then hallow God's name. It was Martin Luther, during the great Reformation, who reminded us that our primary goal in life IS to glorify God. To hallow God's name is to say that God's name is holy.

When we pray "Holy is your name" we take seriously the commandment that prohibits our taking God's name "in vain." How commonplace it is to hear God's name taken in vain. How blasphemous has been the use of God's name in the bloodshed of the Crusades, or during Hitler's reign when *Gott mit Uns* (translated God with us) was on every German soldier's helmet, or more recently as a justification for the oppressive apartheid system in South Africa. Those of us who have been formed by praying "Our Father who art in heaven, holy be your name" are not permitted to abuse the holiness of God by limiting or misusing God's intentions for God's people.

Willimon and Hauerwas tell of a young person who went off to college. He was the first in his family to have the privilege of higher education. When someone offered this student some illegal drugs saying, "Go ahead, try it. It'll make you feel good," the student replied, "No." "Oh, don't be so uptight" said the drug dealer. "Nobody is going to know that you tried a little dope, got a little high." "That's not the point" said the student. "The point is that my mother cleaned houses and washed floors to send me to this college. I am here because of her. I am here for her. I wouldn't do anything that might demean her sacrifice for me."

That comes close to how we are to react to the holy God. Christians don't steal, don't cheat in their marriages, don't bless war, but not in order to get on the good side of God, since, in Christ, we have already been made right with God. We are to live in the light of our knowledge of God's name, God's holy name. The conflict we encounter due to our attempts to live faithfully to the gospel doesn't come to us as a surprise. It comes with the territory. (pp. 48 – 49, *Lord, Teach Us*)

In praying the Lord's Prayer, in naming the holiness of God, we discover not just who God is but also who we are. We are daily reminded that we are not our own. We belong, not to ourselves and our desires, but to God. It is when we acknowledge that truth and live as we pray that the kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. But....more about that next week!

Let us pray: Word and Wisdom, Root and Vine, Shepherd, Savior, Servant, Lamb, Well and Water, Bread and Wine, Way who leads us to I AM, hallowed be your name, and holy be our living in response to your gift of grace in our lives. Amen.

