

19 April 2020 – Matthew 6: 9-13 – *The Lord's Prayer 1*

The Lord's Prayer begins with this invocation: *Our Father in heaven*. It continues with three petitions relating to God, then three relating to our human needs and concludes with a "doxology" or word of praise. For the next several weeks we will explore these petitions – seeking to understand the context in which they were written and reflecting on what they mean for us today. Whether we like it or not – whether it was Jesus' intention or not – this prayer is iconic in the Christian tradition – everyone knows it. We are perhaps defined as much by this prayer as by the Ten Commandments or the resurrection we have only just celebrated – it is what others know about Christians. It is important to think about what the prayer means.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name

Jesus introduced what we call "The Lord's Prayer" with these instructions: *when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret*.

It seems like we have been doing a fair bit of that lately – staying in our rooms – hopefully praying – but in reality, this particular prayer has not stayed much of a secret. Who knows how many times it has been printed on bookmarks and pencils, needle pointed into wall hangings, inscribed, carved, and cross-stitched? Could even the Lord count the number of times it has been intoned at a wedding or graveside? And how often has it been a convenient way to close a church meeting or a safe way to bridge the theological gap between believers of various traditions and cultures?

Sometimes when we don't know quite what else to pray, this prayer from Jesus comes to us and we are so thankful for it.

The teaching in the opening verses of Matthew, chapter six is clear: do not be like the hypocrites who call attention to themselves by their piety – practice your faithfulness in secret – God will see and will be pleased. The Lord's Prayer is lifted up as the example of faithful conversation with God. It is a prayer that is simple and private, in marked contrast to the hollow, public piety of the first-century religious leaders.

In suggesting that we pray in our own room – by ourselves – Jesus does not proclaim righteousness to be simply a personal and private matter! The Sermon on the Mount, in which the prayer is positioned within the gospel of Matthew, can hardly be accused of advocating withdrawal from the needs of the world or limiting ourselves to passive contemplations. Its opening call is to evangelical poverty, mercy, and peacemaking. Far from advocating privatistic religion, Jesus calls the faithful to let their light shine before the world so that all people can see their good works and praise God.

I feel something of that these days – we are all worshipping at home and largely in private, yet we are still concerned with the needs of the world – still interested in the wellbeing of one another – still contributing to the health of our society. Praying in private does not mean that you are praying only for yourself and it does not mean that you are praying alone.

Jesus offers the disciples – offers us – a prayer that does not even once ask God to make us holy, and he sends the disciples behind closed doors to pray because he doesn't want them to be worrying about what

other people think. Not one petition asks God to make them look good. This prayer of Jesus is intently focused upon God. And the private room is worthy of prayer because it helps the one who prays to focus on God – a reminder that prayer primarily has to do with our personal relationship with God.

We pray, "*Our Father*", to enter into conversation with God – to enter into relationship. We pray, "*Our*" because God is not mine or yours or someone else's to claim. The use of this word ends all exclusiveness – we are all children of God.

We pray, "*Our Father*", to enter into a particular kind of relationship – one of trust and confidence. Addressing God as our Father reminds us that God clings to us with parental determination and love – never letting us go. I know that for many the image of "father" is not a positive one; however, Jesus is intending the most significant representation of relationship. Father can be understood as "creator" – the source of all life, and as "parent" – one who cares for and nurtures. According to scripture Jesus refers to God as "father – *abba*", with whom a relationship of love and intimacy and confidence and trust is evident. When we pray, "Our Father" we do so because Jesus did, and he made us his family in an intimate, lifelong, loving relationship with our creator God.

We pray, "*Our Father in heaven*," to remind ourselves that our help rests not in the transitory and arbitrary, but in the steadfastness of heaven – God above and beyond all visible reality yet ever present and accessible to us. According to one children's book character, God is where people love God and where there are people God loves. And, since God loves everyone, God must be everywhere. The character's conclusion is that if God is in heaven, everywhere must touch the edge of heaven and heaven must be wherever love is. "Our Father in heaven," is not pushing God far away – instead it is drawing us into the nearness of God.

When we pray "hallowed be your name" what are we saying – asking – affirming?

The gospel of John likens us to seeds which must die and fall to the ground to truly live and bear fruit – *Those who love their life lose it*. It is by his suffering and death that Jesus glorifies God's name – and his death is a consequence of radical obedience to the demands of love and justice, his commitment to renewal. We need to see God's holiness in the crucified and risen Christ. In this way we understand the petition "hallowed be your name" as a prayer of repentance – a confession that God is God and we are not. It is an admission that our own good intentions and moral endeavors come to nothing without the holiness of God.

As we begin our prayer in relationship with a present and loving God, we ask that God's name will be made holy – and this happens through God's actions of justice, mercy and salvation – God's name is made holy by restoring what has been ruined: renovating the run-down, resettling the refugees, embracing the exile. Holiness looks for justice.

Pray this secret prayer in the quiet of your own room for now. As we worship separately, but together, we can pray in the "virtual" company of others with humility. Enter into conversation with your Creator and your Loving Parent who is wherever love is – in heaven – in you. **Amen**