

**Sermon: Pray in this way... Matthew 6:7-21 January 29, 2023**

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON Rev Steve Clifton**

Every Sunday we recite together the prayer of Jesus, the Lords Prayer, the Our Father...This morning we have prayed it, recited it, sung it, read it from the Gospel and now we are going to talk about it. If we were raised in the church, we probably know it by heart. In spite of its familiarity, most people in my line of work have gone blank on a Sunday morning at least once, have lost the words of the prayer, and usually the congregation just keeps on going without us.

I remember being taught the Lord`s prayer in Sunday School. As a child some of its words and phrases were puzzling. *Hallowed* be thy name. Eight-year-old Steve had no idea what *Hallowed* meant. Sounded like Halloween and that didn`t help.

And as we get older there are parts of the prayer that we may find puzzling. *Lead us not into temptation*. Why would God lead us into temptation?

We say these words together week by week. It`s a good idea to pause and reflect on the words we say. We spent 6 week nights last Lent exploring the prayer of Jesus phrase by phrase and I have maybe 10 minutes this morning, so just a couple things that came to mind as I reflected on these familiar words this week...

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*Our Father*.... The first words of the prayer are worth unpacking.

My kids don`t call me Father. I called my Father Dad. My father-in-law was Poppa. My kids called my Dad, Grandpa. *Father* in English is such a formal word. It`s a title. The word might suggest distance and formality. Jesus spoke Aramaic not English. And the word he used that we translate as Father was Abba. It`s a much more intimate word than *Father* is in English. In teaching this prayer, Jesus is inviting us into the loving presence of a God who is not distant and detached but close and intimate. Jesus tells us that God numbers the hairs on our heads, sees the sparrow fall... God casts the stars in their courses, invites Creation into being with a word, but God is also as close as our own breath. God is not aloof. God is close in love.

*“Our Father”* ...The opening words of the Lord`s Prayer suggests God is male, and older.. The image is anthropomorphic, human .... For some the opening words immediately create distance or discomfort because the image of God as Father is unhelpful in their relationship with God.

I knew a woman who struggled in prayer. She always used the name Father for God. Her own relationship with her human Father was complex and difficult. When she began to address God with other words and images she found prayer much easier.

There are at least 72 names for God in Scripture, all kinds of images, male, female and those that are neither. When Moses asked God on Sinai for the name of God, the answer was cryptic: *I Am*. One of the great teachers of prayer in Christian history, Ignatius of Loyola suggests that if we find it hard to pray to God as Father, we might pray to Jesus, or to the Holy Spirit...we might choose an approach to the Holy or an image of God that helps us to connect to the Holy.

Jesus taught the prayer in his language of Aramaic. It was translated into Greek in the New Testament and then into our English versions. Neil Douglas - Klotz in his book *A Prayer of the Cosmos* offers a fuller translation of the Aramaic opening of the Lords Prayer, suggesting other ways of expressing the words we translate as, "Our Father" :

- Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos,
- O Thou! The Breathing Life of all,
- Respiration of all worlds,
- Radiant One
- Name of names
- Wordless Action, Silent Potency
- O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos!

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A second line from the Lord's Prayer that drew my attention: "Thy kingdom come thy will be done..." The late Walter Wink, a popular American theologian, points out that these words written in Jesus' prayer are not phrased as a request. They are a demand. The words are written in the imperative.

How do you feel ordering the almighty around? Are you comfortable demanding God to act in some way?

Perhaps these commanding, demanding words in Jesus' prayer remind us that we may bring our whole selves, however we are in the moment, to God.

The Hebrew tradition that Jesus was rooted in is a tradition of honesty and openness with God. The Psalmist, for example, brings joy and gratitude to God. But also anger, despair, doubt, sorrow, questions...

In Genesis Abraham barter with God, seemingly changing the almighty mind by haggling down the Holy One of Israel.

Might the Prayer of Jesus encourage us to be fully open with God, bringing whatever is in our hearts, bringing our whole selves into the relationship with God? Even demanding that God's will and way be present in our world...? After all, as Jesus says, *God knows what you need before you ask him.*

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The final reflection for this morning comes from Jesus words before the prayer. Jesus in teaching the prayer encourages simplicity in prayer. In his time Gentiles used complex words and formulas in prayer. The correct words and patterns helped ensure the desired outcome. The Lords prayer is meant to offer prayer that is concise and simple. Precise wording and patterns are not needed with God. Simple prayers are good.

Meister Eckhart wrote: "If the only prayer you say in your life is Thank you, that would be enough.

One writer, when looking back with some disappointment on days filled with good intentions, ends each day with this prayer: “ Oh well...”

Centering prayer focuses on just a single word or image.

Prayer can be so simple that it does not even require words. There is kataphatic prayer- prayer that uses words and images. And there is apophatic prayer- wordless prayer.

Meditation is a wordless time spent in stillness with God.

Following the example of the Quaker tradition we might pray for others by simply picturing them surrounded by the light and love of God...

Or you can light a candle to express an ongoing hope.

The Lords prayer is an example of simple prayer. So, we can relax. However prayer happens for us, it is good.

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*Our Father, who art in heaven.* So begins the familiar prayer we say together week by week.

I would share a version of this familiar prayer that help lift out its richness and meaning. We might hear the familiar prayer in a new way.

BY PARKER PALMER

Heavenly Father, heavenly Mother, Holy and blessed is your true name.

We pray for your reign of peace to come,

We pray that your good will be done,

Let heaven and earth become one.

Give us this day the bread we need,

Give it to those who have none.

Let forgiveness flow like a river between us, From each one to each one.

Lead us to holy innocence Beyond the evil of our days —

Come swiftly Mother, Father, come.

For yours is the power and the glory and the mercy:

Forever your name is All in One.

Amen