

“Becoming Jesus’ Prayer”
Luke 11:1-4
Willow Glen United Methodist Church
July 28, 2019

I have prayed the Lord’s Prayer in gothic-spired cathedrals and in rural chapels with the rustle of corn stalks just outside the door.

I have prayed the Lord’s Prayer at youth camps under a canopy of stars and in nursing homes with people slumped in their wheel chairs.

I have prayed the Lord’s Prayer on mission trips beside dirt-floored houses and in jails looking at another person through a window of glass.

I have prayed the Lord’s Prayer at my father’s grave.

Remembering **where** I’ve prayed Jesus’ prayer, helps me to begin to remember **why** I pray this prayer.

The Lord’s Prayer appears twice in the Gospels—once during the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and again in Luke when an unnamed disciple approaches Jesus and says, “Teach us to pray.”

“When you’re praying,” Jesus says, “do not heap up empty phrases...” And yet that’s exactly what happens when we mindlessly recite the Lord’s Prayer.

Did you know that in the early church, the Lord’s Prayer was considered such a treasure that people had to go through three years of training before they could be entrusted with the words? How much more precious is the prayer now that it has been on the lips of Christians for two millennia?

“Saying one’s prayers is not the same thing as praying.” This quote from the novel *Anne of Green Gables* makes clear the issue with the Lord’s Prayer: we may be **saying** the words, but are we **praying** them?

This morning I want to offer you one method for moving from saying to praying, one method for reclaiming the extraordinary power of Jesus' prayer. C.S. Lewis called the method "festooning" and how it works is that you take the Lord's Prayer word by word, phrase by phrase, and write down your thoughts, your feelings, your associations, your questions—anything that comes to mind.

In the rest of this sermon, I'll do my own homiletic festooning with three of the phrases, but I would encourage you to try it on your own with the prayer in its entirety. This sixty-six word prayer that the theologian Tertullian called "an epitome of the whole Gospel" has the power to change us.

Phrase 1: *Our Father*.

Our...the very first word of the prayer leaps over the fences and walls we build. Not I or me or mine. *Our*. The God of my enemy as well as the God of my friend.

Our Father.

These two words, of course, have been the subject of intense debate regarding inclusive language, but wherever you come down on male, female, or non-gendered language for God, division can't have the last word. *Our*. This God we worship is not the property of any one individual or ideology. When we move beyond saying to praying, when we breathe the prayer in community with others, those we designate as *they* become *us* and *we* become *them*.

My friend Twila Glen tells the story of visiting San Francisco on a rainy Saturday afternoon. After having a cappuccino with a friend, the two of them decided to go to Mass and found a Roman Catholic church on the edge of Chinatown. People of every color and description were streaming through the worn oak doors.

When the worship service started, Twila says that the scripture was obscure and left her unmoved. The sermon was kindly but uninspiring. But when it came time for the Lord's Prayer, the priest invited each person to speak in the language with which they were most comfortable, and suddenly there were people praying Jesus' Prayer in dozens of different languages all at the same time. "It was like a balloon bursting in my head," Twila says. "In that moment I had an indelible impression of the presence of God in every person on the planet."

Our Father.

Phrase 2: *Give us this day our daily bread.*

Our daily bread. There's that communal word again. *Our. Our Father. Our bread.* Bread, after all, is the product of community: wheat farmers; bakers; delivery drivers. But this phrase points to something much deeper than our shared endeavor of feeding ourselves.

Give us is a posture—hands cupped, open, and outstretched. *Give us* demands that we move beyond our proud self-reliance in meeting our own needs as well as beyond our pious self righteousness in attempting to meet the needs of others.

At its heart, *give us this day* is about our dependency on God and the summons to live our lives with trust.

Phrase 3: *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

In Luke, twelve chapters after Jesus' teaches his disciples this prayer, he is the prayer's embodiment. Hanging from the cross, Jesus says: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

This September will be nineteen years since an arsonist burned down Farmers' Chapel United Methodist Church in Indianola, Iowa. My friend Ted Lyddon Hatten was the pastor at that time, and he published a letter to the unknown arsonist in the local newspaper. The letter to the arsonist ended with these words:

Our worship time is 9:00 AM every Sunday. I tell you this because I want you to know that you are invited...Every Sunday we ask God to forgive our sins but only as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us. That would be you. So if you would join us for worship, we could practice this kind of forgiveness face to face. I say "practice" for a reason. I don't expect us to get it right the first or even the second time. Of course we'll continue to work to forgive you even if you decline our invitation to worship...For you see, if we harbor hatred for you in our hearts, we harbor the smoldering ashes of your arson. If we cling to bitterness, we fan the embers of your violent act. If we fantasize about revenge, we rekindle a

destructive flame that will consume us. Forgiveness may be impossible, but for us it is not optional.

What I find so powerful in Ted's words is his acknowledgment that forgiveness is something that will require practice. In fact, the whole of the Lord's Prayer requires practice as we seek to become the unity, the trust, and the forgiveness of which it speaks.

This is where the sermon gets especially personal for me today. I confess that I've been an impatient Christian. I've struggled again and again with having unrealistic expectations for myself—and for others for that matter. I so long to be a person who lives as Jesus taught, but every time I fall short, guilt and shame move in and I find it difficult to forgive myself much less anyone else.

Thanks be to God, though, I'm turning the corner on this. I've come a long way in understanding that faith is about intention not perfection. Life gives us innumerable opportunities to practice love and compassion—not that we'll get it all right, we're practicing after all—but opportunities in which we learn and grow and gradually transform.

The Lord's Prayer is deceptively simple, but Jesus knew that it was a prayer we would grow into. Jesus knew that with time we could slowly move from praying the words to embodying them. As Reverend Bernard Haring has put it: "For the whole of our lives to our death, each of us should be and continue to become a commentary on the Lord's Prayer."

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Remembering where I've prayed Jesus' prayer helps me to remember why I pray this prayer:

To be transformed.

May we pray the Lord's prayer in all the circumstances of our lives--internalizing the words, becoming them.

Amen.