

Feb 18 – Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed Be Your Name

John 17:20-26

During this season of Lent I am asking you to take a journey with me. A journey where we deepen our relationship with God and with others. In the area of Spiritual practices I get more questions about prayer than anything else. If I were to ask all those present who were satisfied with their prayer life to raise their hand, my guess is that only a few would do so. This isn't because you are trying to be humble, it is because you, like Jesus' disciples, feel inadequate when it comes to your prayer life.

In many ways, we do a disservice to this prayer when we name it "The Lord's Prayer." Yes, it came from Jesus but we are not sure if Jesus ever actually prayed this prayer. More correctly, we should call it "The Disciple's Prayer." It was a prayer given to us, Jesus' disciples, to help us deepen our prayer life and grow closer to God.

There are two places this prayer is found in the Gospels. In Matthew it is imbedded in the Sermon on the Mount in the middle of Jesus' teachings about crucial matters such as what it means to live out God's blessings, what it means to follow the law, loving one's enemies, giving generously secretly and more. Jesus gives it as a directive in "you shall pray like this." In Luke, it comes to us because of the request of the disciples.

That the disciples make the request, "teach us to pray" reveals two facts: 1) we are in good company when we have questions about prayer and 2) praying isn't automatic. Jesus response to this request is found in Luke 11:1-4

*Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.*

Prayer was a vital part of Jewish tradition. The prayers were set. Devout Jews knew the prayers by heart. One of the most common prayers was the Shema found in Deuteronomy 6. It begins: "Here O Israel" and later has "and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul and your might." These set prayers were said morning, afternoon and evening. Some Jews, like many Christians today, became so familiar with the set prayers that they said them out of duty, not worship. It was Jesus' desire that prayer be more than a duty. He wanted prayer to express a genuine desire to draw near to God. During Lent, we will look anew at this prayer. It is my hope that it causes you to slow down, think about what you are saying and that this renews God's Spirit in you.

Jesus didn't just tell people to pray he modeled a life of prayer. We read often how he went apart to pray. It appears that every major decision that he made was bathed in prayer. The disciples, understanding that prayer was an essential part of who Jesus was, wanted to be able to pray like him. So, they asked him to essentially "give them a prayer." Teachers of that time often gave their pupils what we would call liturgical prayers to learn. Since that day, disciples of Jesus have been saying his prayer. It is the most well-known prayer of our faith. It is said literally thousands, if not millions of times, each hour.

The disciples were looking for a prayer to memorize and instead find Jesus inviting them into an intimate relationship with God. It is this intimacy that made prayer so vital for Jesus in his life and he wanted nothing less for those who followed his teachings. Each week we are going to look at a brief part of the prayer as we ask, "What was Jesus telling us about God and about our relationship to each other?" It is my hope that this journey will bring us to Easter with a prayer life that enriches us even more than the one we have now and draws us closer to God and each other.

The prayer begins, "Our." I had never thought about how the first word of this prayer might be the most important word in that opening phrase. It is calling us to community. It isn't a pray for "me" it is a prayer for us. The Christian community God is forming through the person and work of Jesus Christ is a new society designed to live as one. In our scripture that we read today, Jesus prayed that we all might be one. "Our" is a word that signifies relationship and community. We talk often about our family, our town, our church and so on. When we use that word we are proudly proclaiming our connection to whatever group we name. Since beginning my preparation for this series and hearing the importance of that first word "our" I can't help but think about all who are praying this prayer with me. I think about how we all, as a community of faith, are saying "our" together. And then the ripples go outwards in my mind, to other churches in Sequim, to others in this state, country and the world. "Our" puts me into relationship with African, Asian, Indian, European Christians.

Yet, if I pause to reflect, it also is a challenging word. I think of ways I use or live out "our" in ways that are exclusive, in "our beliefs" implying you believe differently, or "our denomination" as if it were somehow better. When I pray this prayer I am reminded that we are all one, yes a wonderful diverse and eclectic group, but one.

"Our" creates a warm feeling of community. Even if, at times other Christians try to proclaim an exclusionary understanding of faith that does not necessarily include me,

I pray the word “our” as a commitment to love them. It hurts when we are excluded and Jesus taught us to work towards inclusion so that “our” is not just a dream but a reality.

Because the second word is “Father” when connected to “Our” it means all those in faith are our brothers and sisters. Now I don’t know about your family growing up, or the families you raised, but in my case I did not always get along with my brother and sisters. How about you? We fought and disagreed. I didn’t realize how much emotional pain such bickering caused my parents until I was a parent and saw my children not getting along together. I also realize why it makes my mother tear up when her three children gather together now. “Our Father” is a call to see each as not just a brother or sister, but a beloved brother or sister in Christ. We are called to love, forgive, to help and to forget as we build bridges of unity. How well are you doing with this call to community that we speak about each week when we pray this prayer?

Now let us look at that other word in the opening. Father was an unusual way for Jesus to address God. He used the familiar “abba” which can be translated Papa or Daddy. It is an intimate relationship. This use of a name is again a relational thing. It acknowledges that we are part of one family. One person has likened these two words as being like spokes on a wheel. As we move along the spokes of the wheel toward God at the center, we move closer to one another as well. It also shares our status. We are beloved children.

“Abba”, as used by Jesus, would have been jarring to his disciples when they first heard it. God’s name was so Holy you did not speak it for fear of desecrating it! Even when it was written in the Bible they used abbreviations so it would not be fully spelled out. To now hear that they were to call God daddy was a call to a loving community and a commitment to be loving. It is a reminder we are beloved. It talks about a level of intimacy that few in that day, or ours can imagine as being possible.

We sometimes let the relationship we had with our earthly father color this term. The word “father”, as Jesus used it, is not about our earthly relationship with our biological father, which might actually be a deterrent for our understanding God. Not all fathers are loving and kind. It tells us we are talking about God who is in heaven. One of the insights that I received in studying about this prayer is that using such an intimate title for God was really an invitation by Jesus to name God. As amazing as it sounds, in this prayer Jesus told us that we get to name the relationship that we want to have with the eternal. For Jesus, the relationship he claimed was “abba” or daddy. It speaks some to his relationship with Joseph, his earthly father. It also defines what he expected to happen when he went to God in prayer. Like a child talking to a loving parent, he

expected love, encouragement and direction. Jesus would invite you to name your relationship with God. It can be limited or expansive, close or distant. The name we choose does not change God but it does say much about where we are in our faith journey. If father works for you, as it did for Jesus, use it. Some might prefer mother, or sister or brother. You could use loving friend or Holy One. Perhaps terms like Creator or Redeemer might define your relationship. Maybe even Forgiving One. It doesn't change God but maybe helps you in your prayer time. Also, hear another's naming as just that, their name and relationship. Celebrate it as long as they are not trying to use it to create discord or force you to accept their name for God as the only valid one.

An aside, this prayer, even though it starts with "Our Father" isn't naming God as "male." Some have taken that to be the case. We ultimately know that God is Spirit which is beyond male or female categories. Jesus, being a Jewish male, would think only in masculine terms for naming his relationship to God but we must always recall that God is bigger than names, even ones given to God by Jesus!

We move on to the phrase "hallowed be thy name." Hallowed sounds strange to our modern ears. About the only word most of us can compare it to is Halloween. To hallow means to make holy. How could we ever do that, make God's name Holy? When we try to live as God wants us to, we show that we honor God who is Holy. This is hallowing God's name. It also reminds us that though we are called to have a close and intimate relationship with God. God is still the Holy one.

One paradox of prayer, as Jesus taught it, is this: we who are far from holy are lovingly invited and welcomed to come close to God who is holy beyond our imagining. By honoring this relationship, we acknowledge both the holiness and mercy of God. Each time we approach God in the spirit that Jesus suggested, we signal again that we are accepting God's invitation to relationship. A relationship with God and with others.

So here is my challenge this week. First of all I want you to pray the prayer "Our" several times each day. I want you pray just that word and let it set on your heart. What does that call to relationship ask you to do differently? How is God wanting you to be one with all who pray that prayer?

Second, at the end of each day ask, "God, did I, through my actions today, hallow thy name?" We remember that to do this means to be in a loving relationship with others and with God and to live our faith unashamedly. Keeping that first in our thoughts will help us journey to the cross.