

Epiphany Sermon Series: "The Lord's Prayer"
Sermon Title: Intimate Praise
Jeremiah 3:19-23; Psalm 33:13-22; Matthew 6: 7-13; Luke 11:1-4
Salem United Methodist Church
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We are in the Epiphany season, a time in which God is revealed. One way in which God is revealed to us is through prayer. One prayer we pray every Sunday is "The Lord's Prayer." We can recite it somewhere between fifteen to thirty seconds. It is a short prayer, yet do we actually pay attention to the words as we say them? Do we actually understand the words we utter? Or do they become only rote, empty phrases? In the next four weeks, we will be looking at each aspect of "The Lord's Prayer" and hopefully come away with a deeper understanding how this prayer can transform our lives. Today we will delve into the first phrase, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name."

There are many different versions of "The Lord's Prayer." Each denomination seems to have its own. Our hymnal has three. They are found #894-6. The first one is called, The Ecumenical Text. This is a contemporary version using today's English. It is often used when different Christian faiths come together for worship. The second one is from the former Methodist Church and is the one that we pray. The third one comes from the Evangelical United Brethren tradition. In 1969, the Evangelical United Brethren joined with the Methodists to form the United Methodist Church, thus we have retained their respective traditions of the prayer. These two versions have kept the archaic words of "art," "thy," and "thine." You may also notice that these prayers are a little different from the prayers from the Matthew and Luke passages. During the sermon series we will look at some of these differences. In addition to the many versions, there are many jokes about "The Lord's Prayer." Most of them come from children who misunderstand the words. Here are three: "Our Father, who art in Heaven, how didja know my name?" And, "Our Father, who art in Heaven, Howard be thy name." Finally, one child when she looked at the different cloud formations and colors in the sky thought that it was God's "art in heaven."

Before we get into the particulars of the beginning phrase, there are two interesting items I want to share with you about the prayer. First, some scholars believe we have misnamed the prayer because nowhere is it recorded in the Gospels that Jesus prayed this prayer. These scholars believe that the prayer should be called, "The Disciples' Prayer," because Jesus gave it to his disciples or followers to pray. Luke records that the disciples asked to be taught how to pray. So Jesus gave them this prayer. The second interesting item is that this prayer is very much like Jewish prayers. Scholars who researched prayers used by Jewish people in Galilee during the time period of Jesus have found similarities between these Jewish prayers and this prayer given by Jesus. After all, Jesus was a faithful Jew. However, even though this prayer is in keeping with the themes of Jewish petitionary prayers, this prayer is only used by Christians.

Now, let's break down the phrase, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." We will begin with the first word, "our." First, if we compare Matthew's and Luke's version of the prayer we will recognize that Luke doesn't include this pronoun. And the church has kept Matthew's inclusion of the word, "our." The prayer uses only first person plural pronouns, such as "our," "we," and "us." There are no first person, singular pronouns, "I," "me," "my," or "mine." This is a prayer for the people. This is not a personal prayer. This is not about "me, myself, and I." This is a prayer for "us." The opening word, "Our," means that we are not alone. We belong to a community and that God is not a god just for "me," but God is for everyone: our friends, our family, our church, the entire human family. "Our" also indicates that we recognize we are all related. We are united. "Our" also tells us that God is an inclusive God. No one is excluded from God's love. With the word, "our," we announce that we are the people of God.

The next word, "Father," in recent years has been off putting for some, especially those who have not had a good relationship with their father, or have had fathers that were abusive. We need to remember that Jesus grew up in a patriarchal world. But the Bible includes both feminine and masculine metaphors for God. God is a father who protects his children as well as a mother who gives birth and nurses the young. Jesus describes himself as a mother hen who protects baby chicks under his wings when he thinks of Jerusalem. He also uses the image of God as a forgiving father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. For those who have an issue with this

masculine term, think of God being the father one never had or the father one would want to have. No earthly father is perfect. But our heavenly father is. God is a father who listens, protects, provides, nurtures, embraces, and loves. Roberta Bondi in her book, *A Place to Pray*, states that for her coming to an understanding of God's fatherhood helped her forgive her earthly father's imperfections.

Jesus purposefully used the word, "Father." Actually, in the Aramaic language that Jesus spoke, the word Jesus used here is not the formal word for father, but the familiar word, "Abba." This word is an intimate term meaning a beloved father or loving father. It is more like the English, "Daddy." Jesus uses this term throughout the Gospels whenever he prays or speaks of God. When the disciples heard Jesus use this term, they probably were shocked. In the Jewish faith even though the term, "father" is sometimes used to refer to God, mostly God's name is not pronounced. To address God in such an intimate way would have been disrespectful. So for Jesus not only to give God a name, but to give God an intimate, familiar term such as "Abba," was simply not done. So why would Jesus do this? This one word, "Abba," becomes a game changer. In using the term, "Abba," Jesus reveals to us the close relationship he has with God and offers us this kind of close the relationship. Jesus is as close to God as a son can be with a father. By telling us that we can call God, "Abba," Jesus tells us that we can have the same kind of relationship with God as he has. We can be as close to God as children can be with a father. The term, "Abba," reveals to us the nature of God which is love. God loves and cares for us and in return we are to love and care for God. Abba indicates that God is not a distant entity, but can be as close as a parent is to a child. Abba is the God of Wisdom and the Source of all Life. Abba knows us, cares for us, and gives of self to us. To pray the words, "Our Father," opens us to receive the love the Father has to give us.

The next phrase, "Who art in heaven," again is found in Matthew and not in Luke. These words are words of praise and acknowledgement that God is greater than us. Even though we can have this intimate relationship with God, God is still the God of the universe, infinite, and eternal. Hebrew texts link God to the heavens. Heaven is not necessarily God's address, but a statement that describes God as omnipresent. There is no part of the universe that God is not. God's knowledge, love, and power is everywhere at the same time.

The next part of the phrase, "Hallowed be Thy Name," continues to give praise to God that is greater than we are. The term, "hallowed," means holy, sacred. This phrase expresses that God is holy, that we are in awe of who God is, and that we hold our relationship with God to be sacred. In our world today some might say that nothing is sacred. Our society lacks reverence. Anything goes! However, there are those who do worship athletes, movie stars, rock stars, and even politicians, who profane God's name and who disrespect, demean, degrade, and harm another. When we disconnect ourselves from the sacredness of God, we disconnect ourselves from God. Did you know that George Washington prohibited profanity in the Continental Army? He took the use of profanity seriously. Why? Because when we recognize that God is holy, we will respect God with our language and our actions. When we abuse God's name, we cut ourselves off from the Source of Life and our actions will follow. This is why there is a commandment that tells us not to abuse God's name. God knew if we disrespected God in our speech, we would then disrespect God, ourselves, and others with our actions. Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century bishop, wrote after the great persecutions of the early church that what Christians pray for in "hallowed be thy name" is an ability to mirror the characteristics of God so that anyone looking at us can see in us something of who God is. Roberta Bondi wrote also that when we focus on God's name, the very essence of who God is, as Someone who is holy, we will see the hallowed moments in our lives. We will become aware of the compassion and love that flows from God's holy beauty in the lives around us as well.

As you contemplate the phrase, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name," what do these words mean to you? How do you view God as "Our Father?" By praying these words, are you open to receive the love the Father has for you? What does claiming God in heaven mean to you? And how do you give reverence to God's name? How do you hallow the very essence of who God is? When do you see the hallowed moments our lives, in the lives around you, in the midst of crisis, in the events of the world? Pray these words as a means to see and respond with awe, wonder, gratitude, and love of God's holy beauty in one's own life and in the lives around us.

Resources: *The Lord's Prayer* by Edward Bauman; *A Place to Pray* by Roberta Bondi; *God's Psychiatry* by Charles Allen

