**June 10, 2018**

**Luke 11:2-4**

*Our Father, Who Art in Heaven*

Prayer is how we communicate with God. It is the party telephone line that connects us to God. It is the bulletin board on which we place our spiritual grocery list. It is the warm blanket that God wraps around our trembling shoulders. But what *exactly* is prayer? And how *exactly* do we pray? Some people pray with their hands in the air, while others keep them tightly clasped. Some pray through scripture and psalms and music, while others pray in silence. Some pray with formal language, addressing an Almighty presence like royalty, while others casually speak to God as if we would a friend.

 Whether in meditation or spoken word, individual or communal, prayer is a time when we both send information to God and listen for information from God. Words, images, feelings, gestures, ideas – people pray in many, many forms, all searching for the Holy One.

Prayer is, thus, a profession of faith. Ancient theologians referred to this as the “*Lex orandi, lex credendi.”* Which is, “the law spoken [is] the law believed.”What we say and do is a sort of proof of what we believe; we pray because we believe that *someone* is listening. And when we (as Christians) pray, we admit that *God* is God. We demonstrate that God cares about us and our lives. So, prayer is an act of hope that God will continue to be in relationship with us. As we express our devotion to God, and also our frustrations and deepest desires, we are living into the belief that 1) God wants to be part of our lives and the life of the world, and 2) that God can do something about our life and the life of the world. Author and pastor, Tim Keller, wrote that, “Prayer is both conversation and encounter with God… It is the way we know God, the way we finally treat God *as* God… To fail to pray, then, is a failure to treat God as God.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

 Just as Jesus told the disciples here in Luke’s gospel, if is not if we pray, but when we pray. Followers of God are expected to be in communication with God. Jesus himself spent time in prayer with the disciples and other members of the Temple, as well as prayer by himself, away from the crowds and towns. His prayers in Temple were certainly ancient words memorized by the faithful. “*Baruch atah Adonai eluhenu melech ha’olam*…” “Blessed are you O God, ruler of the universe…” and “*Shemah, Israel, Adonai eluhenu, Adonai echad*.” “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Jewish people still say these prayers today. But we don’t know much of what Jesus said in his private prayers.

So when the disciples explicitly asked Jesus, “how do we pray?” he responded with one of his clearest instructions: When we pray, we should pray like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name…

When we pray, we first name God’s holiness. God’s name – YHWH – that alone is holy. And also God’s being, God’s actions, and God’s dwelling. Whereas we are human and flawed and thoroughly mortal, God is holy. God is hallowed.

Early Christian bishop, Augustine said that this is important because “we imitate whom we adore.” When we begin our prayer by naming God’s holiness, we recognize the ‘other than’ status that God has. We are not praying to another being like ourselves. We are praying to God who is much bigger than and better than ourselves. We are praying to God who is utterly and entirely other than ourselves. And as we admit that God is so different than ourselves, we also gain awareness into both who God is and who God wants us to be. We begin to live as God’s hallowed people when we name God as hallowed.

In naming God as hallowed and ‘other than’ ourselves, we also recognize that there is reason to hope. Because God is Almighty and Hallowed, we can boldly pray for absurdly extravagant things likes food for the hungry, peace for the world, restored relationships, health for the sick, life for the dying, love for the loveless, and relief from rain or drought or winds.

Despite the holiness and hallowed-ness of God, God is not a distant deity. Jesus calls him “Father.” Not the formal term, mind you, but the intimate term, “Abba.” This name is an Aramaic word for Papa or Daddy. Every language probably has an equivalent; it’s one of the first words taught by parents who excitedly await their child’s first proclamation. As a child babbles “Adadadada,” the father says, “Listen! He is calling me ‘Dadda”—or Abba or Vater or Pater. “Abba” is intimate, family word that a child calls their parent. Jesus then sweeps us into the family as he encouraged us to use the same word. We didn’t ask to use the title; God came to us first, adopting us with love and grace. John Calvin recognized this astounding invitation when we wrote, “With what rashness would one call God ‘Father’? Who would claim for oneself the honor of being a child of God, unless we knew we have been adopted as God’s children through Christ.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

Moreover, God is not my Father or your Father, but our Father. Jesus invited us to call God “*Our* Father”. The entire prayer is in the plural – “Give us this day our daily bread... forgive us our debts...” This is not a prayer for any one of us individually, but a prayer for all of us together. When we pray this prayer, we belong to God, but we also belong to one another. As someone once put it: “God doesn’t have any only children.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

So our prayer isn’t just about what I want, or what is best for me, but who we are and what we need. Someone found this old prayer in an English library: “O Lord, thou knowest I have mine estates in the City of London and also in the county of Essex. I beseech thee to preserve these two areas from fire and earthquake, as I have a mortgage on both of these properties. As for the rest of the cities and counties, thou mayest deal with them as thou art pleased.”[[4]](#footnote-4) That is not the prayer that Jesus taught: “Lord, take care of me—too bad about you.” We pray *Our* Father, for as we pray to God, we are praying with and for one another.

A pastor friend of mine went to visit a woman in a nursing home. When he offered to pray with her she said, “I must be getting old, because I can’t remember how to say the Lord’s Prayer.” She thought it was a sign of senility, but my friend suspected it was something else—she didn’t have a regular occasion to say it with the church. The reason we remember the Lord’s Prayer is that we say it together each week. So it wasn’t the woman’s problem that she had forgotten the prayer. It was her church’s problem, her pastor’s problem, and probably our problem; she had been forgotten and ignored. People had failed to pray with and for her. [[5]](#footnote-5)

Many of you know that I went to Idaho last week after my brother-in-law committed suicide. It was a terrible, traumatic, difficult week, with many beautiful and healing moments. A parade of friends visited our family and promised to keep us in their thoughts and prayers… that is one of those things we say when wonderful and terrible things happen, after all. And when people asked, “What can we do to help?” We said, “Pray for us.” For prayer seems like the only thing that might make a difference. But as these words swirled around and around us, I kept wondering, what does that mean? What are we really asking? What is someone doing when they pray for you?

First, it means that they will name God as holy and Lord on your behalf. When difficult days come and you cannot pray. When you cannot worship or adore or name God as holy, other people bring you into the presence of God as they pray themselves. (This is a good reason to come to worship even if you don’t *feel* like it or think you believe. The congregation sees you and prays for you as we sing hymns and read scripture and profess our faith together.) This is one of the most profound gifts of the body of Christ. We are not apart. We are not alone.

So when someone promises to pray for you, it also demonstrates our connection to one another. The connectedness does not come from our own relationships with each other, but through God, the Father/Parent/Almighty and Triune deity. We are the body of Christ together with billions of others around the world, and going back to the beginning of time. When we pray for one another, we release any desire to put our own needs above friend or neighbor or stranger. We ignore the world’s hierarchies, and redirect our lives toward the One who knows what we truly need.

Adam’s family is predictably overwhelmed by grief and chaos after Grant’s death. When people promise to pray for us, we don’t even know what to tell them to specifically pray – for peace? for comfort? for resurrected life? for all of the practical details to be settled? for all of the shame and stigma of mental illness to be erased? for companionship now that he won’t be there for dinner? Or a prayer of thanksgiving for the good that Grant did in life? What words can possibly encompass the width and breadth of prayers that need to be said now?

Yet at the end of the funeral, these several hundred people – neighbors and strangers, soft-spoken church ladies and tattooed young adults, trusted community leaders and edgy former prison inmates all stood up and held hands and together said, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name…” Perhaps that was enough. Amen.

1. Keller, Timothy. Prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III xx 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Albert Curry Winn, *A Christian Primer*, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. W. W. Williamson, Sr. “Six Sermons on the Lord’s Prayer.” I, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. W. W. Williamson [↑](#footnote-ref-5)