

Teach Us to Pray Sermon Series
Name-Calling
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When I was in seminary, I was working with a youth group to plan Youth Sunday. When we got to the Lord's Prayer, we decided to rewrite it to make it more modern. So I told the group I would start saying the prayer, and they were to stop me when we got to a place that raised a question for them. So I started.

"Our"...stop! "Who does that include?" That led to a 10-minute discussion about who the word "our" might include or not include. Then I started again. "Our Father"...STOP! "Why Father? Why not Mother?" Oh boy. That led to a 20-minute discussion on the pros and cons of calling God "Father." Ok, let's try this again. "Our Father, who"...stop! Is God really a person? How do we know God is a "who"? Maybe God's a "what." Another good discussion. I started again. "Our Father, who art..." Stop! "Who's Art? Why is he in this prayer?" At that point, I gave them a bunch of sugar and we went to play hide and seek in the sanctuary.

That discussion showed me just how much this familiar prayer may have become a bit too familiar to us. We all know this prayer. We've said it a zillion times. In fact, the Lord's Prayer is the second most frequently spoken prayer in the world, right behind, "Dear Lord, please let those flashing lights in my rearview mirror be for someone else." The danger with such a familiar prayer like the Lord's Prayer is that it can become rote and lose its flavor. When you've said it so much, do you even think about what you're saying? As pastor Adam Hamilton says, "We know the Lord's prayer, but do we know it? We pray the Lord's prayer, but do we pray it?" For our Lenten sermon series this year, we're going to be taking a closer look at this prayer. What are we really saying when we pray it?

Just the fact that Jesus gives us this prayer in the context of a teaching moment makes an interesting point: We have to be taught to pray. When I taught public speaking, I talked about how everyone assumes that if you have two ears, you can listen well. But actually, good listening is a skill that must be learned. Prayer is the same way. I went to a baseball game once with a friend from England. He had watched a lot of cricket and seen a few baseball games on TV, but he had never really paid attention. So as the game progressed, he had a ton of questions. Why are fouls strikes unless you have two strikes? Why are three strikes an out but four balls are a walk? Why do they charge so much for a hotdog? The more I explained the game to him, the more he understood and appreciated it. Same with the Lord's prayer. The more we ask our questions and seek a greater understanding, the better we'll be able to appreciate it. Jesus gives a couple examples of not praying well – praying to be heard by others or praying lengthy prayers with the hopes of boring God into answering just so we'll shut up. That's not the point of prayer, Jesus says. Instead, said Jesus, there's another way to pray.

There's a reason we say this prayer every week. Yes, Jesus taught it to us, which means it's important. But we could say it at home or in our car. Why in the context of worship? Saying the prayer out loud in front of others is a public witness to our faith, and saying it in the midst of a community reminds us we are never alone. We are connected to each other simply through the saying of this prayer together each Sunday.

So let's jump in with my youth group's question. Who is "our"? If we're not careful, we'll read that as a possessive. God is ours, God belongs to us, which implies God doesn't belong to other people. But this isn't a possessive; it's a statement of inclusion. "Our"

encompasses all those who call on God's name, no matter what name they use for God. Right at the start of the prayer, we are making a bold statement about God. God doesn't belong to us; God is the God of everyone.

"Father" has become a problematic name for God. While the Bible almost exclusively uses masculine language for God, feminist theologians have pointed how that can restrict access to God for some people. First of all, spoiler alert, God has no gender, but we give God a gender to give us a connecting point. Second, if you grew up with an abusive or absent father, linking God to that image can be troubling. But calling God "Father" can also redefine that relationship. In seminary, my theology professor was railing against the masculine imagery used for God in this prayer, and he concluded his rant by saying, "Why would anyone want to call God Father?" A student raised her hand and said, "I would, because God is the only reliable, loving Father I've ever known."

Let's keep that in mind as we talk about what it means to call God "Father." Before Jesus came along, the Jews had a lot of names for God: El Elyon, El Shaddai, Adonai, Yahweh, Elohim. One name they didn't have was "Abba," the informal, familiar name for the male parent. In effect, when Jesus called God "Abba," which he does over 70 times in the gospel, he called God "Daddy." Jesus offered his followers a whole new level of intimacy with God.

This redefines for us what it means to be a parent, and for God to be seen as our parent. Often times, the first role people think of when they think of God is "judge." But think about how that changes when we called God "father," especially in light of the parable of the prodigal son, when the father welcomes his sinful, wayward son with open arms. The father doesn't judge the son; the father loves the son in spite of his sins. God shows us how we are to be fathers and mothers and caretakers for those around us. This line reduces all the complexities of our faith to a very simple, very special relationship. God is our Parent.

And if we are bold enough to claim God is our Parent, then that means those who say "Our Father" with us are our brothers and sisters. This prayer reminds us we are not orphans. We are claimed by God and placed in the midst of God's family. And we are reminded of our obligation to care for our family members, even when they drive us crazy and post ludicrous things on the internet. We are, first and foremost a family, and every single one of us, deserves the same grace God extends to us.

The next few words introduce an interesting paradox that I think exemplifies one of the challenges and blessings of our faith. The statement "our Father" connotes a special kind of intimacy. It conveys a parental closeness with a healthy sense of reverence. But it's followed up with "in heaven." So right away we are encouraged to acknowledge God's intimate closeness and God's majestic Otherness, covering the totality of who God is for us. It hardly seems possible that God who has been from everlasting to everlasting, the eternal, infinite God, should delight to have us call God "Our Father." It is a privilege to pray this prayer.

Where is Heaven? In the Bible, the term Heaven is used in three different ways. First, "heaven" means outer space, like when God created the heavens and the earth. Second, "heaven" means the atmosphere, the part of earth that we can't see, like when Genesis talking about the birds flying in the heavens. And, finally, Heaven is talked about as the dwelling place of God.

Let's take those last two together. If "heaven" means all that is around us that we can't see, and God lives there, then this line positions God, not somewhere up there we can't reach, but all around us all the time. Heaven is distinct from the material world, yet it envelops it. God is as near as the air we breathe. That's why Paul can say in Romans, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God." Heaven is right here. God is right here.

What I love about this line is that it gives God a location. We are not praying to some mushy, amorphous divine blob. We are praying to a specific God who has a specific home in Heaven, which is all around us. And not just us. To pray this means that we acknowledge God is not only here but in the Ukraine and in China and in the prisons and in the White House and in all the places of God's creation. There is no where we can go that God does not go with us. This prayer warns against the contemporary domestication of God. God does not live in America. God does not favor Americans more than God favors other people who look and speak and act differently than us.

We have a divine Parent who is all around us, and we're reminded that God's name should mean something to us. To be hallowed means to be holy, to be different, to be set apart. There are some names in our culture that have become punchlines to jokes, especially politicians and celebrities. Their names are dragged through the mud and spoken in nasty tones. But I've never heard anyone make a joke about Maya Angelou. I've never heard anyone make fun of Wendell Berry. There are some people who are hallowed in our minds.

That's how we are to treat God's name. This is more than about not taking God's name in vain. Just for the record, you shouldn't do that either, but to hallow God's name means to speak it with reverence. And that's not just with our mouths, but with our lives. If we claim to be believers in Christ and followers of God and yet we act in ways that are antithetical to those claims, then we are sully God's name. To say I believe in God and then to treat some with disrespect or to gossip about someone is the opposite of hallowing God's name.

When the German soldiers went into battle in World War II, they had "God with us" inked on their helmets. That's a perfect example of not hallowing God's name. When we claim God loves us more than another person or community or country, we are not hallowing God's name. One author said that all creation is meant to hallow the name of God, to sing the melody of adoration. And when we sin, we are singing out of tune with who we are created to be. We are not allowed to drag God's name through crusades and cruelties. How is your life hallowing God's name? How is it not?

The Parent of all of us, who is all around us all the time, your name is holy and we are meant to keep it holy with our words and actions. As we begin this journey of Lent together, may our lives sing the melody of adoration to our God by honoring God and honoring our brothers and sisters, both in this room and around the world. As this prayer reminds us, we are not alone. No one is alone. Thanks be to God.