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Bridge Street United Church
January 21, 2024
Rev. Dr. John H. Young
Readings: Isaiah 55:6-9; Psalm 84; Matthew 6:7-13

The Lord's Prayer, Part 1

As I indicated last week, during the sermon both this week and next week I shall focus on the Lord's Prayer, exploring its various parts. Before I do that, I want to make some general comments about the Lord's Prayer.

First, and this will be no surprise, some version of this prayer has been an important aspect of Christian life and practice from Christianity's early days to the present. We know that a second century manual for Christians, a manual that offered instruction about various aspects of church life, included a version of this prayer. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, a key early Reformer, Martin Luther, wrote two catechisms—*The Small Catechism* and a *Large Catechism*—outlining things he thought important for his followers to know. He included the Lord's Prayer, with an explanation of the meaning of its various clauses, in both catechisms. Many of us, if we had an upbringing in the church as children, learned some version of this prayer at an early age. The church, down to the present day, includes the Lord's Prayer in most services of worship, whether that be Sunday services, marriages, or funerals. We follow that practice here at Bridge Street.

Second, we find this prayer in two Gospels—Matthew's and Luke's, though the versions are slightly different. Luke's version is a little shorter than the one we find in Matthew. Why might these versions be different? We need always to remember that Jesus's sayings and

teachings, as well as accounts of the events of his life, circulated in oral form for a considerable time after his death. Some scholars think there may have been a now lost written collection of some of his sayings developed at some point after his death but before the gospels we now have were written. The Gospel of Mark was written somewhere around 70 CE, with the Gospels of Matthew and of Luke written probably around 80 to 85 CE. The slight differences you see when you compare Matthew's version with Luke's version are probably the result of slight differences in the oral traditions and the possible written materials each gospel writer had at hand.

Third, while we have versions of what we know as the Lord's Prayer in both Matthew and Luke, it is primarily through the church's worship services, or its liturgies, that this prayer has come down to us. It is there that this prayer has been so central. And different church traditions have also had some differences in the Lord's Prayer. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, the Lord's Prayer stops after "deliver us from evil." Only after the priest adds words of response at that point does the prayer continue with what is called the Doxology, or the words "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen." The addition of the Doxology in the Roman Catholic tradition is something that began in the late 1960s.

Having made these comments, I want to turn now to talking about this prayer that we say with such frequency. I am going to take about one-half of this prayer today, in small sections, with some reflection on each, and the rest of the prayer next Sunday.

Our Father I want to start with the word "Our." Note it is "Our Father," not "My Father." Now because we know the prayer begins "Our," and because we have always prayed it that way, it may never have occurred to us to think about the significance of the fact that it begins with the word "Our," not the word "My." I shall confess that that aspect had never occurred to me until I began to think about this two-week series on the Lord's Prayer. But think how

different is the effect and the meaning! The word “Our” reminds us that, for all the times we may rightly pray this prayer by ourselves and as individuals, “our” brings to mind the recollection that we are part of a corporate body, part of a group of followers of Jesus. Of course, we are individuals, individual believers and followers. And of course we can pray this prayer by ourselves at home, in the woods, at a cottage, in any setting. But whether we pray it alone, or here together as we shall do later in this service, we are reminded that we are not alone. We are part of that body of people who either identify as Christians or are considering doing so.

That is important in two ways. First, “our” can keep us from a kind of personal possessiveness, as if it is “my God” in some special way that does not apply to anyone else. That may not be a temptation for any of us, but the opening wording can help us avoid that. Second, the word “our” reminds us we are not alone. “Our Father,” we begin. “Our”—all of us here, all of us who see ourselves as Christians. We are part of a group, world-wide. Indeed, beyond that, we are part of a Christian witness that extends back over the centuries, all those who have prayed this prayer and sought to be followers of Jesus. We are in alignment with the communion of saints down through the centuries.

Further, at a time when the practice of Christianity here in Canada is a counter-cultural activity, something that only a minority of Canada’s population does, it is good to be reminded that we are not alone in trying to practice our faith tradition, that there are others with us in this enterprise.

And the second half of that opening—Our Father. “Father.” I would start with the reminder that God is not a sexual being, God is neither male nor female. While the Bible frequently uses male imagery for God, it occasionally also describes God’s activity in ways that would be seen as stereotypically female. What I think the use of the word “Father” here intends

to do is to speak to an intimate relationship, a parent-child relationship of deep love and of deep trust. Now I certainly know that not all parent-child relationships are either loving or producing of trust on the part of the child. Not all parents act in such ways to their children. My father was a Children's Aid Society worker for over twenty years. I am not naïve about such things. But the words of this prayer intend to convey an image of tenderness, intimacy, evoking of trust. If, when you pray this prayer, a parental figure does not convey that image, try to think of some other family member who may be able to do so, or someone else. That is what this language is trying to convey.

“Who Art in Heaven.” “Heaven”—not a geographic reference to the sky, but rather a notion of the cosmos, of a God who is over all the cosmos, a cosmic figure. This temptation may be less prevalent to us in contemporary Canada, but history is full of examples where various countries have seen God as “their God,” as if God was somehow not only a special advocate for their country but also located within it. We can rightly think of places like this sanctuary as sacred space, a place where we engage in rituals, and in worship more generally. In doing so, we may sometimes think, in those moments, of God being especially present in this place. That is fine, indeed quite appropriate. There is absolutely nothing wrong with doing so. We can most certainly experience God as present to us in particular places, including this sanctuary. Scripture certainly attests to God being present in particular moments of time and in particular places. We have a problem only when we assume that somehow God is present here and not elsewhere, found only in our country, or our region. “Who art in heaven.” God is over all, not restricted to one place, one country, one region, but over all.

“Hallowed be thy name.” “Holy be your name” is another way of saying that same thing. Several things come to mind here. First, this emphasis on God's holiness is a particular emphasis

in the Psalms. Second, when we worship, seeing God as holy, worshipping God as such, is language we find in the hymns we sing, and in many of the Psalms we read. It is in background in many of the prayers we offer. We see God as holy, as worthy of praise and adoration.

Third, when we think about hallowing God's name, we may well think about the contrary, about profanity, about the commandment not to take God's name in vain. That is important. But Martin Luther, that 16th century Protestant reformer, made a point in his discussion of the Lord's Prayer that has been echoed by others since, but that may not occur to us. God's name, Luther wrote, can be profaned by deeds as well as by words. In other words, how we live, our deeds, are a way in which we hallow God's name [Luther, *Large Catechism*, pp. 105-106]. When we pray, "Hallowed be thy name," we are praying that God's name would be hallowed, by us and by others, in what we say and in the things we do.

"Thy Kingdom Come." We are praying that God's Kingdom will come. God's kingdom. One different from the world in which we live. Not different in the sense that we might think the phrase refers to a heavenly kingdom, a place where we shall be with God after death. No, God's kingdom here. And we know that that kingdom looks very different from the world as we know it. In praying, "Thy kingdom come," we are committing ourselves to doing our part, whatever that might be, to make that kingdom come. We are committing ourselves to ask, in all the things we do, "are my actions here ones that align with helping God's kingdom to come?"

I remember about fifteen years ago now teaching an undergraduate course at Queen's in the History of Christianity. A number of the students in the course wore plastic bracelets with the letters WWJD on them—WWJD, What Would Jesus Do? The concept was not new. It came from a late 19th century novel where many of the characters in the novel committed themselves to ask

that question in relation to the various decisions they needed to make in their lives. That is the approach that we are undertaking when we pray “Thy kingdom come.”

In terms of government policies that I support or oppose, are my actions and advocacy in alignment with what I believe God’s kingdom is about? I make this point without any desire whatever to be politically partisan. I want simply to note that to pray this prayer is to pray that our world takes a certain shape, and it is a shape very different from what exists, different from the orientation of much of our own society.

At the same time, I would note that much of what I see people in this congregation do, not to mention things that have been done in the past, are efforts to bring about that kingdom, a place where all have enough to eat, sufficient clothing, adequate shelter. I see it in the range of volunteer activities in which I know a number of people in this congregation are involved, not only here at Bridge Street but also in various organizations in the city and beyond, organizations that seek to address some of those societal problems. When I think about the congregation itself, the Drop-In, or the meal programme that operated here for many, many years now, or the commitment some forty years ago to build the Quinte Living Centre—these are some of the things that come to mind. To pray “Thy kingdom come” is to commit ourselves to hope and to work for a certain kind of world.

“Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” With this petition, we are praying that God’s will be done, here on earth, as it is in heaven. I want to note several things. First, we are praying for what God wants, rather than what we want [Willimon and Hauerwas, pp. 65-69]. There is nothing wrong absolutely nothing wrong, with asking God, in prayer, for the things we need. We do that, both here in church and at other places and times in our lives. But in this part of the Lord’s Prayer, we are praying that what God would will and wish would come to pass here

on earth. God's will, not ours. God's hopes for our world, not ours. Remember Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Not my will, but yours be done."

Second, there is a strong Biblical tradition that God works toward God's will. God works so that there is the greatest possibility for good and the least for evil was a key conviction of a significant theological school of the last half of the twentieth century.

Third, things do not always work on our time scale. "For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night," the Psalmist wrote.

"Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"—our prayer that God's will be done, God's priorities, not ours, but priorities with which we shall work insofar as we can.

"Lord, teach us to pray," Jesus' disciples asked him. May we indeed continue to pray to the one we call God. And to that one who created this world, who has been revealed most fully to us in Jesus, and who continues active in our world through the Holy Spirit, to that one be all honour, glory, and praise, this day and forever, Amen.

Resources

Luther, Martin. *Luther's Large Catechism*. Translated by J.N. Lender. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1967.

Richardson, Cyril. *Early Christian Fathers*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953.

Willimon, William H. and Hauerwas, Stanley. *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996.