

7th Sunday after Pentecost – July 19, 2009 – Ezekiel 36: 22-28; John 12: 23-28; **Matthew 6: 9-13**

*Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from evil.*

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME

Jesus introduced the Lord's Prayer with these instructions: "when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret."

What has happened to this secret prayer? How did it get so far out of the closet? Who knows how many times it has been printed on bookmarks and pencils, needle pointed into wall hangings, inscribed, carved, and cross-stitched? Could even the Lord count the number of times it has been intoned at a wedding or graveside? And how often has it been a convenient way to close a church meeting or a safe way to bridge the theological gap between believers of various traditions and cultures?

What has become of this secret prayer?

Matthew wrote for people who had grown up in the religious tradition – people who knew their rich heritage – people who had heard God's word, and had learned to pray in childhood. For Matthew, the teaching of Jesus, as it is lived in the community of faith, bears the presence and saving action of God even as the institutionalized version of righteousness practiced by some of the religious leaders of the day is questioned. The ethical teaching of Jesus is based on God's mercy and grace and offers a vision of life more faithful and free.

The teaching in the opening verses of Matthew, chapter six is clear: do not be like the hypocrites who call attention to themselves by their piety – practice your faithfulness in secret – God will see and will be pleased.

The Lord's Prayer is lifted up as the example of faithful conversation with God. It is a prayer that is simple and private, in marked contrast to the hollow, public piety of the first-century religious leaders and gentiles.

But why does Jesus consider the secret chamber to be the most appropriate place for prayer? And how did something so private become one of the most public of prayers – so universal that it was once a part of public school life – no matter the faith tradition of the participants – so universal, in fact, that I can recognize when people are praying the Lord's Prayer even when they are speaking languages I do not understand and have never heard before? And how did the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray with care become something that is mumbled by rote with often no more attention than we might give to recalling a parent's platitude, our social insurance number or well worn clichés?

In suggesting that we pray in our own room – by our selves – Jesus does not proclaim righteousness to be simply a personal and private matter! The Sermon on the Mount, in

which the prayer is positioned within the gospel of Matthew, can hardly be accused of advocating withdrawal from the needs of the world or limiting ourselves to passive contemplations. Its opening call is to evangelical poverty, mercy, and peacemaking. Far from privatistic religion, Jesus calls the faithful to let their light shine before the world so that all people can see their good works and praise God.

A prayer encouraging personalistic piety would hardly begin with "Our Father".

Jesus does not command a secret piety because he has a thing against trumpets. He offers the disciples – offers us – a prayer that does not even once ask God to make us holy, and he sends the disciples behind closed doors to pray because he doesn't want them to be worrying about what other people think. Not one petition asks God to make them look good.

This prayer of Jesus is intently focused upon God, not the self or others. And the private room is worthy of prayer because it helps the one who prays to focus on God – a reminder that prayer primarily has to do with our personal relationship with God.

In prayer, as in any intimate communion, pretenses fall, honesty prevails, and one is no longer the same, but lost in the other by this bond of relationship. Out of the relationship with God, exemplified by the Lord's Prayer, comes true piety – true faithfulness. The disciple is to give, pray, and fast, but not by the rules or institutional demands of religion. Faithful living comes from the heart, and only God can do this work. When this happens, the reign of God *has* come.

We pray, "Our Father", to enter into conversation with God – to enter into relationship. We pray, "*Our*" because God is not mine or yours or someone else's to claim. The use of this word ends all exclusiveness – if God is *our* Father, then each other person is our brother or sister. We are all children of God – and if we pray "Our Father" while despising, dismissing, or discounting others, then the prayer is a mockery and we are liars.

We pray, "Our *Father*", to enter into a particular kind of relationship – one of trust and confidence. Addressing God as our Father reminds us that God clings to us with parental determination and love – never letting us go. I know that for many in our society today – and perhaps for some of you here – the image of "father" is not a positive one; however Jesus is intending the most significant representation of relationship. Father can be understood as "creator" – the source of all life, and as "parent" – one who cares for and nurtures. According to scripture Jesus refers to God as "father – *abba*", with whom a relationship of love and intimacy and confidence and trust is evident. When we pray, "Our Father" we do so because Jesus did and he made us brothers and sisters with himself in an intimate, lifelong, loving relationship with our creator God.

We pray, "Our Father in heaven," to remind ourselves that our help rests not in the transitory and arbitrary, but in the steadfastness of heaven. It is the same when the Psalmist cries out for help and recognizes that even the mountains are not constant when compared to God. It is not that we mean God is "up there" or "out there" somewhere far removed from us, but that God is above and beyond all visible reality yet ever present and accessible to us.

According to one children's book character, God is where people love God and where there are people God loves. And, since God loves everyone, the boy in the story

continues, God must be everywhere. If God is in heaven, he concludes, everywhere must touch the edge of heaven and heaven must be wherever love is. "Our Father in heaven," is not pushing God far away – instead it is drawing us into the nearness of God.

The Lord's Prayer begins with this invocation: *Our Father in heaven*. It continues with three petitions relating to God, then three relating to our human needs and concludes with a "doxology" or word of praise. For the next several weeks we will explore these petitions – seeking to understand the context in which they were written and reflecting on what they mean for us today. Whether we like it or not – whether it was Jesus' intention or not – this prayer is iconic in the Christian tradition – everyone knows it. We are perhaps defined as much by this prayer as by the Ten Commandments or the resurrection – it is what others know about Christians. It is important to think about what the prayer means.

When we pray "hallowed be your name" what are we saying – asking – affirming? One commentary I read quoted the following disturbing comment from Luther on this first petition of the Lord's Prayer: *I know of no teaching in all the Scripture that so mightily diminishes and destroys our life as does this petition*. To substantiate the statement he said that we all live a life in which God's name and honour are constantly maligned – we have other gods, and want to be masters of our own lives.

Think of our reading from the gospel of John this morning in which Jesus likens us to seeds which must die and fall to the ground to truly live and bear fruit – *Those who love their life lose it*. It is by his suffering and death that Jesus glorifies God's name – and his death is a consequence of radical obedience to the demands of love and justice, his commitment to renewal. We need to see God's holiness in the crucified son of man. In this way we understand the petition "hallowed be your name" as a prayer of repentance – a confession that God is God and we are not. It is an admission that to become new and whole we do not begin with ourselves – our own good intentions and moral endeavors come to nothing without the holiness of God.

As we begin our prayer in relationship with a present and loving God we ask that God's name will be made holy – that God will live up to God's own reputation among the nations. In the passage from Ezekiel we see that the holiness of God's name is completely wrapped up in God's actions of justice, mercy and salvation – God's name is made holy by restoring what has been ruined: renovating the run-down, resettling the refugees, embracing the exile. In obedience to God we are summoned to "be holy as God is holy" – not an invitation out of the world since we know that God is all and everywhere, but an invitation into the world in a life of service and self-denial. Holiness looks for justice.

Pray this secret prayer in the quiet of your own room and in the company of others in humility. Enter into conversation with your Creator and your Loving Parent who is wherever love is – in heaven – in you. Call out your sorrow at forgetting to hold God's name sacred. Give thanks that you are God's children knowing that God's name has been glorified and will be glorified again. **Amen.**