

The Lord's Prayer

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“When you pray, say” – Luke 11:2a

Last Wednesday evening, Elizabeth Leung began our Lenten program by asking us to pay attention. Not to her – she already had our attention – but to ourselves and what was going on around us, because paying attention is the entry point for prayer.

Prayer starts when we shift our attention from the myriad details of the daily routine to God – whatever and whoever we perceive God to be. “What is your image of God?” was one of the first questions that Elizabeth asked us to pay attention to, and reflecting on that question, quietly and on our own, in various locations around the church building, was how we began our experience of prayer.

“I don't know exactly what a prayer is,” the poet Mary Oliver wrote in one of her most beloved poems. “I do know how to pay attention,” and her poem about paying attention to a summer day – the grasshopper moving her jaws “back and forth instead of up and down” – is as devout a piece of writing as anything with the word God in it. Barb brought that poem to the attention of the Writers' Circle a couple of weeks ago; I thought of it immediately last Wednesday when Elizabeth asked us to pay attention.

If you've been in church since Ash Wednesday, and have been paying attention, you may be a little sick of hearing the Lord's Prayer by now. I read it out of Matthew's gospel during the Ash Wednesday service. I read it again from Matthew's gospel last Sunday morning. And now, this morning, I've read it again, this time from Luke's gospel, and doubtless you've noticed the differences, not only between the two canonical versions, but also from the version that we say in church, which is based on, but is slightly different from Matthew's version, and it is significantly different from Luke's.

I'd like for us to spend a few minutes this morning paying attention – really paying attention – to Lord's Prayer. There's a lot in our religion to pay attention to, and the prayer that Jesus taught us is as good a place as I can think of to slow down, dig deeper, and move beyond simply repeating a set of words Sunday after Sunday.

What you and I are most familiar with is a liturgical version of the Lord's Prayer; it is based on Matthew's version, but it's not the same. There's also more than one liturgical version, and ours comes from the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It differs most obviously from the biblical version by the addition of a concluding doxology – “For thine is the kingdom and the power” and so forth – that's not found in the earliest gospel manuscripts.

If you've ever attended a Roman Catholic service with a mixed congregation at which the Lord's Prayer was said, you know that you can always spot the Protestants because we barrel right into that concluding doxology while all the Catholics around us wait for the priest has a chance to say the embolism, a short prayer before the doxology that elaborates the final petition of the prayer asking for deliverance from evil.

And even we Protestants are divided by what we say when we say the Lord's Prayer. Some of us use the word “debts” and “debtors,” while others of us Protestants and all of our Catholic siblings use

the words “trespasses” and “those who trespass against us.” The Greek word *opheilema* can mean either a debt or a trespass, and since Jesus didn't speak Greek in any case, what Jesus actually said and what we >say< that Jesus said are even farther apart than we might initially have thought.

And that's okay, because this isn't an exercise in trying to recover the *ipsissima verba* – the actual words – of Jesus. We're not paying attention to the Lord's Prayer as a direct quote from Jesus; we're paying attention to it as a gift from the church.

Jesus doubtless said many prayers during his lifetime, and he probably taught his followers to pray in a variety of ways. But the reason this prayer became permanently fixed to his title in the church's worship is probably because of how the Church Father Tertullian described it in the second century when he called the Lord's Prayer “the summary of the whole gospel” (*De oratione*). It's a model prayer for Christians, and our Lenten program this year, and this series of sermons I'll be preaching on prayer, gives us a perfect opportunity to spend a few minutes paying attention to this most famous of Christian prayers.

Let's start at the beginning and spend some time with that little word “our” that opens the Our Father. If we bore down into what “our” might mean, when spoken by a Christian at prayer, we might discover that those three little letters need to be taken with a great deal more seriousness than most of us are accustomed to giving them.

Jesus never taught his followers to pray, “My Father,” because God doesn't belong to any of us individually. God is “our” father because God made us all, and all who respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit to acknowledge God as their creator can rightly call God father – or mother, since they both point to the same reality, namely, the one who makes us all possible – our creator, in other words.

And since God answers prayer, we have to wrestle with the fact that God may not be answering our prayers because God is answering someone else's prayers, and we know that we all don't pray for the same thing.

Can anyone here this morning doubt that there are millions of Russians praying just as we are for the health and prosperity of their country, for their way of life, for their form of government, and for their leaders? Or that many Christians in North Korea and China are doing the same? Our enemies pray for their group's continuance and prosperity, just as we pray for ours, and our groups are diametrically opposed. Whose prayers is “our” Father answering, since God is the father and mother of us all?

For centuries, Catholics prayed that Protestants would see the errors of their ways and Protestants prayed in the same way for Catholics – both praying to the same God, “our” Father.

How many of us pray right past the implications of the “our” in “Our Father”? How many of us pray with no thought of the prayers of countless others, whose prayers may or may not align with ours?

“Pray for an end to abortion” we're urged by signs on some church lawns, which many of us take to mean praying for an end to >legal< abortions, while others of us continue to pray that *Roe v. Wade* will not be overturned by the Supreme Court. Which of those prayers will “our” Father answer, and how?

And how many of us would find ourselves stuttering and muttering if we prayed, “Our Father and Mother, who art in heaven”? Language has associations and connotations as well as denotations, and maleness is not an association that many of us find helpful when we pray to God. Neither is fatherhood. It would be nice if all of us had Ward Cleaver as a father, but most of us did not, and the associations that the word “father” brings to many minds, including my own, are complex and not altogether happy. Imagine how difficult it must be for someone who has suffered abuse or neglect at a

father's hands to have to sit in church, Sunday after Sunday, addressing God exclusively as "Our Father." As Christians, we're obliged to pay attention to things like that.

So why don't we pray "Our Creator," which is what we mean by using the word father? The short answer is because of tradition. It may surprise some of you to learn that the version of the Lord's Prayer that we use here at Faith comes not from Jesus, but rather from a 1759 Roman Catholic handbook for priests in the English-speaking countries of England and Wales. If you compare all the English versions that are out there, that's the version that's closest to what we say here at Faith. So our version of the Lord's Prayer is a Catholic version of that prayer – except at two places.

Our Reformed ancestors – specifically Scottish Presbyterians and English Congregationalists – felt that the words "debts" and "debtors" more accurately translated what is found in the Gospel of Matthew than "trespasses" and "those who trespass against us" do, and so that's why we use that language instead of the English version of 1759. That's part of our Reformed tradition.

The other place where we depart from the 1759 priest's handbook version is in the concluding doxology and the omission of the short prayer – the embolism – that I mentioned earlier. Tradition includes the doxology because it's found in the majority of manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew. It's not found, however, in the >earliest< manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew, and it's not found in >any< manuscripts of the version of the prayer that I read to you earlier from the Gospel of Luke. What is this telling us? It's telling us that Luke's version is probably closer to the original.

If you've ever played the party game of telephone, you know that things tend to get garbled the more they get repeated. And if you've ever been a party to gossip – and I'm sure none of you have every done that – you probably know that information tends to accumulate rather than dissipate around an attention-getting subject. Details tend to get added, things tend to get re-arranged for purposes of clarity, and >more< common words tend to get substituted for >less< common words.

So, centuries ago, biblical scholars noticed this same sort of pattern among biblical texts. Some stories in the Bible, especially in the gospels, came in shorter and longer versions, and since we know that people are more likely to add to than subtract from a story, the axiom arose in biblical scholarship that the shorter of two versions is probably the more original.

So Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is probably closer to what Jesus actually taught his disciples than the version that Matthew preserves. Matthew's Lord's Prayer is part of the Sermon on the Mount, which Jesus preached to the crowds. Luke says that Jesus was praying by himself in an undisclosed location, >one< of his disciples asked him to teach them to pray as John taught >his< disciples to pray, and then Jesus gave them the shorter version of his famous prayer. The shorter version for the disciples got expanded when it went public.

Luke's version begins simply, "Father," which Matthew expands to "Our Father, who is in heaven." Does that difference matter? I think it does, as I've said. Does that mean I'm going to reject Luke's version? No, because the fact of multiple versions of the prayer tells us something about what different communities of Christians thought was important when it came to praying. Both versions preserve Jesus' prayer as a prayer of the >people<, not the prayer of a person. "Give >us<," both versions say, not "give me." There isn't a single singular pronoun referring to humans in either version of the prayer. So what's implicit in Luke's simple one-word address – "Father" – Matthew makes explicit by including the plural possessive pronoun "Our."

That's the earliest stage of the development of Christian doctrine. That's how doctrine is formed. There's where all of our doctrine ultimately comes from. We start with Scripture and see what trajectories are established there, and then we follow those trajectories into our own setting, asking

what the implications of those trajectories are for us.

So what might be the implications of that little word “our” for us? When we ask “our Father” in heaven for “our” daily bread, who is the “our” for whom we're praying? Is it just our family? Our friends? Our community? Our fellow Americans?

Or might it be the “our” whose Father God also is? Might the “our” include our sisters and brothers trying to escape poverty and violence by walking to America only to be turned away by American Christians? When we pray for “our” daily bread, are we including those children of “our” heavenly Father as part of “our”? Are we praying for and with them? And if we are, does it not make hypocrites of us to ask >God< to feed them while we refuse to?

I told you last week, friends, to handle prayer with caution, and I repeat that caution this morning. We pray regularly for “our” daily bread, and God has answered our prayers with an abundance scarcely imaginable to most of human history and most of the globe today. But because we have been thoughtless in our prayers, paying too little attention to the “our” with whom and for whom Jesus taught us to pray, we have gradually built up a world of gross imbalance, trans-generational poverty, and pervasive injustice. We have narrowed the scope of what “our” means, and one of the things that our Bread for the World table tents reminds us is to always keep pushing the edges of what constitutes “our.”

For those with the ears to hear, the prayer that Jesus gave his followers is indeed, as Tertullian said, a summary of the entire gospel. That summary begins with the very first word – if, that is, you're paying attention.