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Lord, Teach Us to Pray, part 3
 Matthew 6:5-9

On the slopes of the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem stands the Church of the Pater Noster, the Church of the “Our Father.” This beautiful, stately church is built on the site thought to be where Jesus teaches His disciples the Lord’s Prayer. Within the church’s cloister and on its exterior walls, the Lord’s Prayer is inscribed on ornate plaques in 140 languages – Biblical Greek, Latin, German, Korean, Swahili, French, Hindi, English and so on. The church of the Pater Noster stands as a testimony to the universal appeal of this brief sixty-five word prayer that Jesus teaches us to pray.

The Lord’s Prayer is universally loved. A few weeks ago I visited a hospital patient who is drifting in and out of consciousness. I’m not sure he knows who I am. But as I conclude my prayer and begin the Lord’s Prayer, I hear him audibly repeat after me, *“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.”*

The prayer is simple enough for a toddler to learn, and yet has a depth of meaning that we can study for a lifetime. The simple word “our,” puts an end to claims of status; it declares that we are all one in Christ. No wonder Jesus becomes angry when His disciples argue about which one of them is the greatest. No wonder He models servant-hood by washing the grimy feet of His disciples at the Last Supper, just before His arrest, trial and sacrificial death.

The simple word “our” draws us into community. “It is not good for a man or a woman to be alone.” When Dietrich Bonhoeffer returns to Nazi Germany from the safety of America in 1939, he does so to rejoin a community of the faithful, a community that calls Jesus, not Hitler, “Lord.” By then, the Nazis are forcing Jews to wear yellow stars; they are euthanizing the handicapped, and their armies are poised to march into Holland, Belgium and France. To stay strong, to sustain each other’s faith, to hold each other accountable, we need each other, so we pray, *“Our Father, who art in heaven.”*

And the simple word “our” teaches us that we can do so much more together than apart. Together we support a girls’ school in Pakistan; together we teach ESL to New Americans; together we build bridges with Christians in Cuba; together we nurture our children, teaching them to build their lives on the rock who is Jesus. Apart from one another, we can accomplish almost none of that.

Together we pray, *“Our Father.”* So God is not simply a higher power, or impersonal force. God is personal and intimate, seeking a relationship with us. So Eugene Peterson insists, *“Using the metaphor ‘Father’ for God defends*

against the subtle but insidious depersonalization of prayer. In our technology-saturated culture, we ask: 'How do I pray?' or worse, 'How do I pray effectively?' The question distorts a personal relationship into an impersonal technique. So if I can just get into the right mood and get the right words in the right order, I can get God to do what I want or get what I need" (Peterson, Tell It Slant, p. 169).

Praying "Our Father," is a great privilege. The Old Testament never calls God "Father." But Jesus calls God "Father" fifteen times in the Sermon on the Mount alone. So listen carefully to our text and two other texts that will help us understand the phrase, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name."

Matthew 6:5-9, 14-15; Leviticus 20:26; Revelation 4:6-8

Why is it a great privilege to pray, "Our Father?" It is a privilege to pray "Our Father," because our sin separates us from God. The Apostle Paul declares that we are children of wrath, not children of God. We often misunderstand that while everyone on this earth is created in the image of God and is loved by God, not everyone is a child of God. To become a child of God the Father, we must be adopted into God's family.

Listen to how John begins his gospel, "*Jesus was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. Jesus came to those who are his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, but born of God.*"

When we receive Jesus as our Savior and our Lord, we are adopted into God's family. Jesus even tells us, "*You did not choose me, but I chose you,*" So as adopted children, we're given the right to call God, "Father."

I've always been moved by parents who say to adopted children, "You're not just adopted; we chose you!" Early in my ministry a distinguished teacher, who is loved by her family, greatly respected by her students, and honored in our community tells me of a lifelong blot on her self-esteem. For some unknown reason, her birth parents put her up for adoption. So, like a nagging headache, she can't escape the thought, "Why didn't they love me?" But one day this verse from John's gospel strikes her like a thunderbolt, "*Jesus says, 'You did not choose me, but I chose you.'*"

That verse changes her whole self-image, even her life! "I'm chosen," she keeps thinking, "by my Creator, by the God of the universe." So I must be loved and precious and valuable. And she wept for hours, embracing a truth she had never realized.

Of course, praying, "Our Father," doesn't assure us that life will be easy. For as Jesus says, "It rains on the just and the unjust alike." Even as children of God,

we have no immunity from pain, sickness, hardship, accidents, and tragedy. What we do have, though, is the assurance that we are loved. God is as caring as loving Father or a nursing Mother. And we will never walk alone!

Now here comes the balance. We are privileged to pray, “*Our Father*,” but Jesus adds, “*who art in heaven*.” We worship a loving, intimate Parent, but also an awesome Creator, who digs out the ocean depths, who shapes the mountain peaks, and hangs the stars in the sky. We pray to a God with whom we must not trifle. When God calls Moses to receive the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, God tells Israel, “*Do not touch the mountain lest you die*.” Then we read, “*The Lord descends on Mount Sinai with fire . . . smoke billows up like smoke from a furnace and the whole mountain trembles violently*.”

God is intimate, kind and forgiving, but God is also majestic, holy, and a consuming fire. God is not our buddy. Jesus is so angry when a child or helpless person is victimized that He says, “*If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, he’d be better off being thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck*.” Jesus is so angry at fraud of the moneychangers’ that He takes their tables and hurls them against the wall, sending the coins clattering to the pavement. He is so angry at the arrogant presumption of the Pharisees that He calls them “whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside, but inside filled with death and corruption.”

As the heavenly One, God demands respect and obedience. He is angry if we do not protect the helpless, if we ignore child abuse and human trafficking, if we do not have total integrity, and a humility of spirit!

Strikingly we mistranslate the Greek at this point. Jesus literally says, “*Our Father in the heavens* – PLURAL! In ancient Jewish thinking, there are three heavens. The first heaven is the world in which we live, with air, water, birds, fish, land and sea. The second heaven is the night sky – the stars, moon, comets and galaxies. The third heaven is the unseen spiritual world, which totally surrounds us. So praying, “*who art in the heavens*,” declares God’s majesty, and reminds us that God is in all three heavens, so He is near. For the Psalmist rejoices:

*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there?
If I make my bed in the depths, you are there?
If I rise on the wings of the dawn and settle on the far side of the sea,
Even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast!*

And praying, “*Our Father, in the heavens*,” calls us to keep a heavenly perspective. Sometimes there is no other answer to grievous injustice or to undeserved tragedy. The expectation of heaven kept slaves from giving in to utter hopelessness as they sang, “*Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry*

me home. Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home. I looked over Jordan and what did I see, coming for to carry me home. A band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home." A heavenly perspective doesn't ignore this world. Rather, since we will answer to God in the coming world, a heavenly perspective infuses this world with purpose, hope and urgency.

And finally, for today, we pray, "*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name*, or Father, may your name be respected, revered, honored, and holy. In a sense, Jesus is commenting on the third commandment, "*Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.*"

Some years ago a truck driver in Maryland is arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct. He is so verbally abusive to the arresting officers and the magistrate, so coarse and vulgar, that the magistrate feels he must give the driver more than a \$100 fine and a month in jail. Doing some research, he finds that Maryland still has a statute against public blasphemy. So he gives the driver two months in jail and a \$200 fine. That, of course, draws the ire of the political correctness police who ridicule reference to an obviously outdated law.

But "*hallowed by Thy name*," isn't part of the opening address of the Lord's Prayer, it is the first of the Lord's Prayer's six petitions. Petition 1: Hallowed be Thy name! Petition 2: Thy kingdom come. Petition 3: Thy will be done, on earth as in heaven." Petition 4: Give us this day our daily bread. Petition 5: Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors. Petition 6: Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil. Then we have the closing benediction, "For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen."

Surprisingly the petition, "*hallowed by Thy name*," prays that God's name be honored throughout the earth, which is similar to Islamic extremism, Except . . . what our Scriptures add is, "*Be holy as the Lord your God is holy.*" As God is to be separate and undefiled, we are also to be separated from sin and defilement. And God is very specific about what that means.

Be holy! So do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive another. Do not defraud your neighbor. Pay wages promptly. Honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy. When you harvest, leave some gleanings for the poor, the widow and the alien. Do not oppress an alien, for you were once aliens in Egypt. Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. In short, love your neighbor as yourself!

We hallow God's name, not by killing so-called infidels, not by planting car bombs in marketplaces, or attacking synagogues, magazine headquarters, and kosher supermarkets, but by being holy and pure of thought and heart, honoring the God we worship.

How then do we pray? We pray, “*Our*,” committing ourselves to growing in faith together, to being part of a community. We are privileged to pray, “*Our Father*,” with a complete confidence in the love and grace of our God. We pray, “*Who art in heaven*,” looking at life through a heavenly perspective, confident that our futures are totally secure, in this life and in the life to come. And we pray, “*Hallowed be Thy name*,” asking God to help us be holy, as the Lord our God is holy. And here’s the wondrous news: When we pray like this, our Heavenly Father will always listen. Thanks be to God! Amen.