

The Preaching of the Word at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church

215 Richmond Road, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185-3534

“Our Father...”

First of a series of sermons on the Lord’s Prayer
The Gospel according to St. Matthew 6:7-13

The Second Sunday in Lent

February 21, 2010

How do we begin to pray? Where do we find the words to speak to God? What words may we speak to address the Ineffable One?

It is a relief to hear Jesus say, “Pray then in this way.” In the middle of his Sermon on the Mount he teaches his followers how to pray. We call it “The Lord’s Prayer.”

It’s great to have the words, the right words, words you can count upon, words that speak your heart, and in this case: words from on high that may be spoken to the One enthroned on high. The right words make a difference.

During the Second World War the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was filling in for a vacationing pastor in New England. Following the sermon he prayed a brief little prayer, something he had scribbled down in the study right before he came into the sanctuary. Afterwards, one of the worshippers approached Niebuhr saying how much that prayer had meant. Niebuhr, thinking nothing of it, pulled out of his bible the little scrap of paper and gave it to him. The next year that worshipper used that prayer in Christmas cards. Others picked it up and used it and reused it until it has doubtlessly become the best-known prayer in North America. As soon as I speak the words, you will recognize it, some of you, I am certain, know it by heart.

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Later, when the prayer was so widely published, Niebuhr himself was not even sure whether he had composed it himself or remembered it from somewhere else.¹ Just a few words scratched out on a summer morning, but the right words make such a difference. We need the words of prayers to tell our own truth before God.

To his disciples, to those who gather around to hear him teach, Jesus gives the precious gift of words, the words of a prayer: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.”

The words are not original. With these words Jesus shows exactly who he is, the child of a heavenly Father, yes, but also a Jewish man who shares the memories and

¹ Richard Fox, **Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography** (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 290

hopes of the people of God. A half-century ago, Biblical scholars emphasized the uniqueness of this prayer. Nowadays they are fascinated by how utterly Jewish Jesus' prayer is, praying for the hallowing of God's name, praying for the coming of God's kingdom, praying for bread, praying for forgiveness, praying to be spared trials, praying to be delivered from the threats of evil—all of these were characteristic themes of Jewish prayer at the time of Jesus.

Rabbis—teachers—like Jesus were expected to teach their disciples how to pray, for what to pray, not so much the exact words of a prayer as an outline to be followed. That is what we find in the Lord's Prayer: an outline to be followed, a basic shape on which we are meant to hang our own prayers. When Jesus teaches his disciples, "Pray then in this way," he offers a structure for prayer, not words to be memorized. Certainly that is how Jesus followers and the first theologians of the church understood it.

Some people grow anxious noticing the difference between the Lord's Prayer in the gospel Matthew and the Lord's Prayer in the gospel of Luke. They're the same, but different. The shape is the same, the words, different.

Sometimes there is awkwardness at weddings and funerals and public gatherings of Christians when we pray this unifying prayer only to discover that Episcopalians and Baptists have trespasses and Presbyterians have debts. As a matter of fact, it was a conversation about this very thing in our Worship Ministry that generated this sermon series on The Lord's Prayer. The prayer is not about the exact words, however, it's not about which is right, "debts" or "trespasses" or "sins." it's about forgiveness. It's great to have the words, but this is more than the words.

In the sixteenth century when the Reformers of the Church were trying to teach the Christian faith, they discovered that many people already knew the words of the Lord's Prayer. The words they knew were Latin, but because their knowledge of Latin was limited they did not understand what they meant. They knew the words but could not hear the invitation to draw near to God. It fell to teachers like Katarina Schütz Zell of Strasbourg to teach people how to pray.² We speak so frequently of Martin Luther and John Calvin, it seems important to remember that there were other teachers during the Reformation as well and some of them were women.

We may wonder if we are so much different from that of those pious sixteenth century Christians who had carefully learned to pronounce the words and spoke words they barely understood. How many of us would pray, "Thy will be done," if we thought about that completely. We know the prayer, but we don't know the prayer; we know the words, but for what does Jesus invite us to pray?

Jesus invites us to begin, "Our Father." Or we translate in English: "Our Father." If you grew up Roman Catholic and are of a certain age, you learned to pray "*Pater noster*." In the Greek of Matthew's gospel Jesus teaches his followers to pray "πάτερ ἡμῶν." Of course, Jesus didn't speak English, probably knew a smattering of Latin, knew Greek but probably didn't teach using Greek. In this matter scholars are overwhelmingly unanimous: Jesus taught in the Aramaic language and when he taught them to pray not "father" nor "πάτερ" but "Abba" (אבא). "Abba" is a child's word for a parent or a parent's word for a respected and beloved elder. Jesus taught his followers, "pray then in this way," and they did pray that way, and so we hear the Apostle Paul

² Elsie Anne McKee, "John Calvin's Teaching on the Lord's Prayer," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Supplementary Issue Number 2, 1992, p. 88.

telling the Romans, “When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit [of God] bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:15-6).

“Abba”—the word begins with *aleph*, the first letter of the alphabet, the letter that begins everything. *Aleph* is a vowel to fill our mouths with breath before the consonants begin carving out petitions. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner explains, *aleph* “has no sound. Only the sound you make when you begin to make every sound.... The almost sound you make before you make any sound.”³ Before we ask for anything at all, before we speak even “abba,” there is this *aleph* sounding from somewhere deep within us, mysterious, full and at the same time, waiting to be filled.

Ah—the sound of breath. Ah—the sound of drawing breath at the beginning of life. Ah—the sound of fear, of being startled. Ah—the sound of joy and ecstasy. Ah—the sound of pain that takes breath away. Ah—the sound trust makes. Ah—the sound of peace beyond all words. Ah—the sound of breath escaping and returning to God who gives breath, who gives words to pray, who gives—Ah!

Jesus invites his followers to begin to pray, “Ah.” Abba! The Apostle Paul assures us, “When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit [of God] bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” Can prayer be so basic, so elemental, so simple?

Some people are put off by the “father” language. That’s why I included in our reading Isaiah’s words likening God to a nursing mother. The point of that language is that God is the one who gives us life, who feeds us and cares for us. The wonder is not that God is “father” or “mother” but that God is the one who we encounter us as “Thou.”

For the Jewish theologian Martin Buber this was the astonishing wisdom of the Scriptures’ witness: that we are invited to look into the very mystery of our existence, into the deepest existence of all things, recognize God and whisper “Thou.” When we know ourselves as human we turn to “Thou.” Buber writes, “as I become I, I say Thou.”⁴

So we look into the depth of the atom tracing subatomic particles that can only be figuratively seen in faint traces and mathematical models and declare, Thou.

We look into the far reaches of space where astronomers study supernovas from light exploding 60 million years ago and in wonder our mouths drop open and we say Thou.

The poet Anne Porter wondered if after her death she might be:

a tiny flake of ash
still glowing with the spark
of the life you gave me
and if I’m tossed
into a fearful nothingness
beyond the stars
there to go whirling
whirling round
until my fire goes out
until my fire goes out
I still will praise you.⁵

³ Lawrence Kushner, **Eyes Remade for Wonder** (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), p. 5.

⁴ Martin Buber, **The Way of Response**, ed. By Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1966) p. 48).

⁵ Anne Porter, “A Song of Fear and Fire,” **Living Things** (Hanover, N. H.: Zoland Books, 2006), p. 27.

Thou, we dare to say.

The Roman Catholic paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin worried not a whit about evolution. Instead, he looked into the fossil record, saw the work of God and sang, “Thou.”

When I went to be Interim Pastor at New Providence Presbyterian Church in Maryville, Tennessee I quickly discovered one of my duties was to be prayer partner to a talented young surgeon. Like most surgeons he did not lack confidence in himself, but he had even more confidence in God and in prayer. We prayed before his surgeries and he told me how in the midst of a surgical procedure he would discover God. There in the gory tangle of blood and bowel: Thou. Like the psalm said: we are fearfully and wonderfully made, inside and out. An artist made us, the author of beauty, the master knitter who knit us together, so many ways to speak of this One.

Beyond our language to describe, beyond images of “father” and “mother”: Thou. We are not alone. In the darkness, in the light: Thou. On the best day of our life and on the worst: Thou. At our birth and at our birth and each moment in between: Thou.

The phrase “Our Father” points us to this vast and immeasurable truth. We did not make ourselves, we did not give birth to ourselves: we receive life as a gift the way we received it from our mothers and fathers. We grow and are nourished—if not by earthly mothers and fathers, then by those who care enough about us to feed us and protect us and care for us. We have days when we are hungry and when we stagger naked and vulnerable in an apparently hostile world but in spite of all the evidence to the contrary we come to the place where the most appropriate thing we can say is “Thou,” “Our Father” and as we say it and as we hear people all around us saying it, our trust is confirmed: there is One in the midst of the mystery to whom it is not only appropriate but to whom we are compelled to speak, “Thou.”

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