

“A Timeless Request”
Ezekiel 36:22-32/Matthew 6:9

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.”

Those words mark the start to a beloved model for prayer suggested by Jesus himself. It is a prayer that has been uttered by believers for more than two millennia starting with the very first disciples and spoken by Christians around the world still. Its familiar phrases and rhythm make it possible for any of us to speak those words without thought, so for seven Sundays here we are slowing down to ponder each of its lines in a more deliberate way.

We start, of course, with the opening. Jesus has just urged his followers to pray not with excessive words, but with confidence that God already knows what they need before asking. In the next verse he says “Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”

Those first two words are so familiar that our Catholic friends will sometimes refer to the Lord’s Prayer as the “Our Father.” While it is true that Jews and Greeks in the first century would sometimes pray to God as Father, Jesus does something subtle, but powerful in inviting us to start with the word “our.” As to say “*Our* Father” affirms that what follows is not just for the pray-er, but each other; not only for ourselves, but all people. The plural pronouns continue throughout: “give *us* this day *our* daily bread... forgive *us our* debts as *we* forgive *our* debtors... lead *us* not into temptation, but deliver *us* from evil.” Jesus did not propose that we pray “*My* Father.” He will use that pronoun certainly, but that is not the word he wants for us. Instead, in starting with the word “our” Jesus makes clear this prayer is a community act whether together or alone when spoken and whether or not we are happy about the company that word includes.

There’s a tale, for instance, of two men who met in church one day, smiled coldly and said “Hello.” Later, the first one prayed “God, I thank you that I am not like him. He comes to church, but he cheats on his wife and his income taxes as well. Since the church is full of hypocrites like him, I’m glad that the only thing that brings me to this place is the baptism of my grandchild.” The second man prayed “God, I thank you that I can come here each week and give generously, and regularly take Communion and that you have not made me like this hypocrite who comes to your house only because his grandchild is being baptized.” Behind the two men sat two women, the first of whom prayed “Lord, I love everyone so much, but I am angry with you, for you have not answered my prayers as I think you ought, and you are not running the world the way I want it run.” The second woman said “Lord, I love you, but I can’t see why you let all those others get away with their hypocrisy. They do not come here out of the pure motives I have.” On hearing all those prayers God said “It is good that these people are in my house this day, for if ever there were persons who needed to be in my presence it is they.” (Anonymous)

The prayer that Jesus taught is all about community and it includes a clear word that God’s ways are not always our ways. As for him to have us quickly add the phrase “who art in heaven” is a way of keeping us from getting too chummy with God, too, avoiding an over-familiarity with our Maker perhaps best articulated in that old bumper sticker “God is my co-pilot.” Instead, Jesus makes clear that the one who is heaven is God of all and calls us to pray.

After that brief introduction, Jesus suggests the first of three petitions--“hallowed be thy name.” The word “hallowed” means to make something holy. For most of us--there are particular locations that are holy or sacred. The place we met our spouse-to-be or the hospital where our child was born, the spot where the Gettysburg Address was delivered or the stadium where our school won the state championship; places become holy because of what humans do in them. In the Lord’s Prayer, though, we are not asking God to hallow a location, but a name.

Dale Bruner, professor emeritus of New Testament at Whitworth University and long-time Sunday School teacher in the First Presbyterian Church of Spokane explains that petition. “When we pray ‘hallowed be your name’ we are asking God to be central, to be God to us, to his church, and to his world. The fact that Jesus made this petition our first petition indicates its importance to his mind. Our main concern in life should be that God be treated as God. Moreover, the prayer to the heavenly Father... is a petition that *God* will *himself* make himself central... Behind the passive voice of this ‘hallowed *be*’ petition is the active God who is asked to do the hallowing, the centering, the making real, the glorifying.” (Bruner, Dale. *Matthew: The Christbook*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1987, p. 241) In other words, Jesus doesn’t call for us to pray “hallow your name” as that would be a command to God. Yet “hallowed be thy name” is a way of asking God to “show the world who you are;” something that only God can do.

Our Old Testament reading makes that clear as the prophet Ezekiel shared a direct word from God. The setting for that passage was a moment six centuries before the time of Jesus when the nation of Israel was in exile. Their land had been overrun and the Jews forcibly removed from their homes and taken to Babylon; a painful stretch of time that lasted for decades. To put it in context for Eagles fans, the people of Israel were in exile for 70 years, the exact length of time since the first NFL championship in Philadelphia. Thus, while many of us here this morning—including this pastor—hope the title drought in effect since 1960 will end tonight—the people who first heard God speak through Ezekiel had been waiting even longer. Their exile had come about because of unfaithfulness to God and our reading shares a glimpse of how it will end.

“It is not for your sake,” God says, “that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations.” God speaks of things he will do--gather the people and place them in their own land, make them spiritually clean and replace hearts of stone, put God’s spirit within them and give them abundant harvests. It is a wonderful future promised, but the divine one is clear as to the reason it will happen. “It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord God; let that be known to you.” Rather, it is for the sake of God’s precious name.

In a similar way, when we pray “hallowed be thy name” we are asking God to act in a way that will bring glory to God. It is a request that God will yet bring about a change or result so dramatic that all humankind cannot help but notice. Like the words spoken through the prophet Ezekiel, that petition, when granted, will not be for our sake, but God’s and while do not live in exile, we don’t have to look far to see times when God’s name needs to be hallowed yet.

For when we watch and listen as 156 women bravely testify against a former Olympic team physician while the man sits there holding his Bible, we can naturally begin to pray “hallowed be thy name.” When political expediency causes Christian leaders in high places to look the other way in the face of moral failings we can feel compelled to pray “hallowed be thy name.” And when we or others use the name of God as an epithet or as a casual response to moments of surprise—good or bad--Jesus urges us to pray “hallowed be thy name.”

That part of the Lord’s Prayer remains just as timely as it was when first proposed to those who heard Jesus speak on a hillside overlooking the sea. And it remains the best place for you and I to start in those moments when we seek God’s comfort and leading still.

Twenty-two years ago, I read a newspaper column with the intriguing title of “This is a tough time to be God.” It was written by *Boston Globe* journalist Mike Barnicle two weeks after TWA Flight 800 exploded minutes after take-off from JFK Airport. The National Transportation Safety Board eventually concluded the likely cause was a spark near a fuel tank, but that ruling didn’t stop the conspiracy theories. At the time of his column, that investigation was just beginning so Barnicle didn’t try to guess what had occurred. Instead, he took that event as a

starting point for how people will turn to God seeking answers and often misuse the name of God for their own purposes. Some of what the journalist said is dated, yet much still rings true.

“A truly terrible event took place high above Long Island Sound,” Barnicle wrote. “Two hundred and thirty human beings were killed. And right now only God knows why. Or how. Predictably we expect too much, too quickly from Him. We want answers...explanations and solutions. And we want them yesterday because we are impatient, raised in an era when instant gratification has been aligned with a lack of individual accountability that has turned social chaos into an art form...In an odd way,” Barnicle went on, “God is a victim here, too...the world is overburdened with those who use God’s name...to carry out their personal evil. Doesn’t matter what they call Him—Allah, Jesus, Christ, Big Guy, Numero Uno—they kill, terrorize and make war, all the while claiming they are doing it out of love for Him...They do it in Belfast. In Israel. In Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia. In Washington, London, Paris and Bonn.

“Jews claim they are His chosen people. And that makes Moslems mad. Then Catholics hear this and get upset because they figure God is their guy and only listens to the others because He is polite. I’m telling you, if He wasn’t God stuff like this would drive Him crazy. As it is, He spends an incredible amount of time and energy separating us here on Earth and trying to whisper common sense to us in the clinches. Like, cut it out.

“But we don’t...We keep adding to the suffering of innocents and, when grief becomes unbearable, we ask Him for help and, incredibly, He’s there for us. God only knows why.” (Barnicle, Mike “This is a tough time to be God,” *Boston Globe*, July 28, 1996)

In offering a model for prayer, Jesus wanted us to know that we’re all in this together and that only God can fully straighten things out. Thus, we pray “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” The words are timeless. The need they express is, too.