

Our Father
Matthew 6:9-13
November 1, 2020
First Presbyterian, Luling

Our daughter Rachel has taken to “advising” me on my sermon writing. Last week, I had to email her what I had so far, so she could help me make it better. She was pretty sure it needed to include Shrek, who first appeared in a movie in 2001, way before she was born. So this week, I asked her advice on what to say about the Lord’s Prayer, and as I was asking her the question, a memory popped into my head. I share it now with her permission.

She was about three years old, but talking a LOT, in full sentences and paragraphs. She attended church every week and either sat with me, or if I was off somewhere preaching—like Luling for instance—she sat with another family at Andy’s church. It never really seemed like either of the kids were paying much attention at that age. It was a constant negotiation over who got the pencil, and who got to sit in my lap, and who would hold the hymnal. Most of the time, I would get home and have no idea what Andy had said in the sermon, just because the kids were such a distraction. They weren’t behaving badly, just being busy, active little girls. At least that’s how a number of years have smoothed over the memory of that time.

Anyway, one day early in the week, Rachel began running through the house, which was not at all unusual. As she ran, though, she was yelling at the top of her lungs, “Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done! Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done!” over and over again. Like a miniature street preacher. At first it was funny. Then I took a moment to pat myself on the back, for putting up with little kids in church—it turns out they really DO absorb what they’re hearing week after week, even if it seems like they aren’t paying attention at all.

And then, I finally thought “I wonder why she remembered *that* line, with its old fashioned language and concepts way above a three year old’s head?” Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. And then I thought, some days, I really would like to run around yelling “thy kingdom come, thy will be done,” because the world seems to be going in the opposite direction from God’s kingdom and God’s will. The intervening years haven’t diminished that feeling.

I can’t remember when I myself learned the Lord’s prayer. I remember Mrs. Shumake, our first grade Sunday School teacher, having us trace over the letters in rainbow colors. But I already knew the prayer then. I learned it way before I knew it was actually in the Bible, much less the context of where it appears.

It appears right after we left off last week. Jesus has spent a couple of paragraphs teaching the disciples how *not* to pray: don’t pray to show off in public. And don’t heap up empty phrases. But he hasn’t told them how *to* pray, nor what to pray for. And these few verses that we know as the Lord’s Prayer answer those questions. A slightly different version appears in Luke’s gospel, and yet another version, closer to what we say, in an early church teaching document called the Didache.

How to pray, and for what we are to pray. That’s what Jesus turns to in these verses.

How to pray and avoid the things Jesus warned us about last week is to make the prayer a communal effort. The Lord’s prayer is in the plural. We and us and our, rather than I and me and my. Especially when we pray in public, we pray in the plural. It keeps us from assuming that

a singular prayer covers the needs and pleas of everyone else. It keeps us from putting ourselves in the center of things. It encourages us to think of those who are different than us. And praying in the plural upholds us when we have a hard time praying on our own. There's nothing wrong with praying in the singular, for asking God for what you need, and thanking God for what you have, but when we pray together, Jesus shows us, we pray in the plural.

What are we supposed to pray for? This little prayer tells us that, too. Especially as Matthew has recorded it, it falls into roughly two sections, one focused on God and one focused on humans. You may remember that a month or so ago when we talked about the Ten Commandments, they fall into roughly those same two categories. I don't think that is an accident or coincidence.

In the first section, about God, we remind ourselves who God is—God is our Father in heaven, which means no one else is. We remind ourselves that God is holy, and thus different from us. And we remind ourselves that God's kingdom is what we hope for, that God's will is what we submit to. We belong to God, and we follow God's will and work to live in God's kingdom, on earth as in heaven. In just a few phrases, we establish that God is different and apart from us, and at the same time that God is here with us, and we are with God.

In the second half of Matthew's version of the prayer, the focus shifts to what we pray for ourselves. Jesus encourages us to pray for our daily needs—our daily bread. Jesus encourages us to pray for forgiveness for ourselves and for the strength to forgive others. And that word—the one that gets all confused when Christians of different traditions try to say the Lord's Prayer together—debts, sins, trespasses—that word can mean all of those things. So Jesus is saying it's good to pray about sin and forgiveness, but he's equally saying that it's good to ask for our economic debts to be forgiven and to ask for the courage and compassion to forgive the economic debts that others owe us. Economic justice is within the realm of what we are to pray about. And lastly, it's good to pray about our trials and temptations and tests, to ask God, just as Jesus will later do in the garden of Gethsemane, to be excused from those tests, but if we aren't, then for the strength to persevere through them.

For all of those times when we don't know what to pray. Or we don't know how to pray. Or we don't have words for what we need to pray. We are not left floundering around by ourselves. Because the Lord's Prayer is how we pray for each other. And the Lord's Prayer gives us a model for the things that we pray for.

I suspect that this week may be more difficult than most, especially for the plural "us" in the United States. We could do far worse than turn to this prayer of Jesus. In turbulent and uncertain times, the Lord's Prayer can both reflect our mutual support in prayer and function as a support of ourselves and our neighbors. Let us hold each other in prayer.