

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor**  
**“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name”**  
**Matthew 6:5-15**  
**Baptism of the Lord**  
**January 10, 2010**

Someone once approached a teacher and asked her how to cultivate a deeper prayer life. “Say the Lord’s Prayer,” the teacher replied, “but take an hour to say it.” (1)

But we rarely take an hour to say it, do we?

More often, we rush through the Lord’s Prayer at breakneck speed, tearing toward the finish line that is the benediction and the afternoon NFL playoff game kickoff, in no particular order. Most of us can chant the familiar words in rote multiplication-table rhythm in 60 seconds flat without thinking a whole heck of a lot about what the words mean.

This is how it often is for us when we say the Lord’s Prayer.

But then there are other times: the visits that you make to your great-aunt who is traveling deeper and deeper into the dark tunnel of dementia. Some days she knows you; sometimes she thinks that you are your father, but just before you kiss her goodbye, you pray the Lord’s Prayer together and she always knows every single word and it is a holy moment for both of you. And there was the moment when you knelt on the chancel steps to be ordained as an elder, as will happen in today’s service, and the words of the Lord’s Prayer enveloped you in what seemed to you to be the mist of God’s own Spirit pressing close upon your skin—that memory stayed with you so that when there were difficult decisions to be made at Session meetings, you felt strengthened by a knowledge that you were participating in something bigger than you. And there was the night that it seemed that you simply couldn’t go on, couldn’t cry, couldn’t even pray, or so you thought. But lying in your bed, staring into nothingness, you whispered, “Our Father, who art in heaven,” and while it was just the tiniest feeling that you couldn’t in any way prove were someone to ask you, you knew, you just knew, that you weren’t alone.

“Say the Lord’s Prayer, and take an hour to say it,” a teacher once said.

And so, beginning today, we will. Not merely for an hour, but for six weeks, we will nest in the richness that is this much beloved prayer which Matthew tells us that Jesus taught the disciples. We will nest in the Lord’s Prayer and cultivate our relationship with God.

We begin today by focusing primarily upon the first word that appears in the opening line as we pray it in English, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.”

Before we get to that word, let me say that I considered but have chosen not to focus upon the word “Father.” I will simply say that any sermon on the Lord’s Prayer does need to

acknowledge that there are some within the Christian family who find it difficult to pray “Our Father” without some intense experience of alienation. (2)

When I was in the four-year-old Sunday School class at Shandon Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina, my gentle and loving teacher Lois Trammell was teaching us to pray, and she said to her little bow-tied and patent-leather Mary Jane shoed congregants who were sitting cross-legged on the rug, “We speak to God as our father in prayer, but we also need to remember that not everyone has good fathers, and it may be hard for those who don’t to pray this way.”

I have never forgotten what Mrs. Trammell taught me back in 1956. Honestly, I cannot say anything truer or wiser than she did. We pray and relate to God as a loving parent, trusting that God’s love transcends any human parenting which we may have received, be it good or be it poor; we remember that not everyone has good fathers and it may be hard for some to pray in this way; *and*, however we pray, our prayer ought to drive us toward being the parents and grandparents and citizens and Christians who strive to create a world where every child is loved with a love that reflects the love of God.

With that being said, let us focus upon the word which appears in the English translation of the text as the first word of the prayer, the word *our*.

Jesus didn’t teach his friends to pray “my” Father. He didn’t teach the church to pray “my” Father. He didn’t pray, and he didn’t live as one who claimed a relationship with God as a personal, private possession.

In the gospel according to John, Jesus is said to have spoken to his disciples, “I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends” (John 15: 15). He lived as one among a community of friends, and he prayed as one among a community of friends.

And look at who Jesus’ friends were: for starters, a woman who doesn’t know where to draw appropriate boundaries but barges into a for-men-only party and smashes an alabaster jar of perfumed oil that cost more than a house and pours the expensive oil all over Jesus’ head in such a way that it leaves the first-century fraternity brothers choking on their olives (4); for another, a guy who is way, way up one day, the next day down, one day, “You’re the Messiah,” the next day, “I’m sinking, save me!,” one day, “Lord, I’ll lay down my life for you,” the next day, “I don’t know the man.” Given this scenario, we might say “something is wrong here. Let’s make an appointment to get things checked out.” Jesus, however, reached out and embraced Peter and called him “friend.”

Friends, Jesus called them, and not just them, but so too all kinds of folks who lived on the margins. And in so calling these his friends, and praying to God as “our” Father, he shows us the community with whom we are to pray as well.

I have a minister friend, Charlie, from my days in San Antonio. On nights when he couldn’t get home to have dinner before getting back to the church for a meeting, Charlie would make a stop at a fast-food restaurant, Taco Cabana. The food is great at Taco Cabana and

inexpensive too, and also this particular location is open 24 hours and located on a main thoroughfare headed into downtown, so it is one of those places where you see all types. One night he was sitting there eating his quesadillas and drinking his Diet Coke when a well-dressed career woman, attired in an expensive tailored suit, probably a lawyer or a corporate executive at the end of a long and no doubt lucrative day, walked to the counter. She ordered her food, opened her Gucci bag, fished out some dollar bills and change, paid for the meal, picked up the tray and walked over to a homeless man who was sitting at one of the tables. She put the tray down in front of him and smiled. She blessed him with a meal and a smile. A woman/ a man. A prosperous woman/ a poor man. A prosperous Latina woman/a poor Caucasian man. And the blessing-yes, it was the man who was blessed. But Charlie was blessed as well in witnessing the act of compassion. And, so, I have a hunch, was the woman herself. (5)

“*Our* Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” We pray, and through our praying as Jesus prayed, we learn to live, not as isolated individuals in our own bubbles, but as a community of brothers and sisters who bless one another.

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

So Jesus teaches us to pray and to live.

1. *The Spiritual Formation Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1999), 1279.
2. Donald Juel, “The Lord’s Prayer in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke,” in *The Lord’s Prayer: Perspectives for Reclaiming Christian Prayer*, edited by Daniel L. Migliore (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993), 58.
3. Alyce M. McKenzie, *Matthew* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1998), 48.
4. The description is from Anna Carter Florence, “A Baccalaureate Sermon: Smashing Beauty,” *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4, Pentecost 2004, 19.
5. I have added a few details in this story told by Rev. Charles Foster Johnson. I really don’t know what Charlie ate at Taco Cabana, but I do recommend the quesadillas over anything I’ve yet eaten in North Carolina!