

Our Father: First in a Series On Prayers Jesus Taught

TEXT:
Matthew 6:5-13

February 3, 2008

Have you ever had dinner at the California Pizza Kitchen? It's amazing what you can do with pizza these days. You can get your traditional cheese and sausage pizzas, but at California Pizza Kitchen you can also get a Santa Fe Chicken pizza, with tomato salsa and guacamole, or a Peking Duck pizza, or a Tandori Chicken pizza with a tomato-yogurt and curry sauce. The only thing that connects these dishes of Latino, Chinese and Indian origin with a traditional Italian meal is what hold them together – a pizza crust.

Now you might wonder what does California Pizza Kitchen have in common with the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. Only this: all over the world, in Russia, in the remotest parts of Peru, in drought stricken Somalia, in the few churches left in Iraq and in every corner of this nation, there are sisters and brothers in faith who come together each Sunday and say with us the Lord's Prayer. This prayer connects us all. Whenever people of the Christian faith come together across denominational lines, despite all their clashing theologies and liturgies, they can at least say this prayer together. It is the most ecumenical thing that we as Christians do.

The Lord's Prayer – the prayer Jesus taught us – is the oldest

liturgical prayer of the church. It has been consistently prayed for 2000 years. It is the embodiment of a living spirituality. The disciples knew this prayer when Peter, James and John went up the mountain with Jesus; it was the prayer that Mary knew when she sat at the feet of Jesus, listening and learning; and it was the prayer of the disciples when they gathered in the Upper Room on the night of the Last Supper.

But this prayer doesn't only send us looking backwards, it is also the prayer that connects us with the future; it will be prayed for generations to come.

Throughout the gospels, it is clear that prayer was important to Jesus. There are many examples of his prayers in the gospels. The disciples sensed that prayer was the basic source for power and inspiration in Christ's life. They saw how he would slip away quietly in the morning to pray. They experienced it for themselves when he went up the mountain on the remarkable day of transfiguration. They saw it again, in the garden, immediately before he was arrested.

But of all the prayers in the New Testament, this is the only prayer that Jesus taught. It was common practice for a rabbi or teacher to teach his students a special way of praying. John the Baptist did it for his disciples.

And so one day, one of the disciples of Jesus asked him to teach them to pray as John taught his disciples. Jesus, then, offered this prayer to his disciples as the model prayer.

The prayer begins, simply, "Our Father." From the very beginning, we are reminded that this is a prayer about community, about a horizon larger than our own, and it is about more than my needs, it is about the world in which we live. We begin by saying "our." The prayer is emphatically a *we* prayer, a prayer that we recite as members of the church, the people of God: "Our Father."

Looking at it in a different way, we see that there is not a trace of individualism in this prayer. You cannot say this prayer and once say the words "me" "mine," or "I". It does not identify God as my father, your father or the father, but "Our Father." Even if you offer this prayer alone in private devotions you are reminded in several ways that you do not pray alone. You always include those who are around you, and of those whom you do not know and will never know. They are part of this prayer; they are included because they, too, are part of the people of God.

When we offer this prayer, we are not asking God to give me my bread, or to forgive my debts or to save me from temptation. When we begin our prayers, we

might be thinking that I need bread, but as we pray, we realize that so do so many other people, and so our prayer is transformed, "Give us our daily bread." We might think about how we have messed up in life and have hurt others, and so we pray that to be forgiven for our sins, but as we pray we realize that there are many other people who wish for their sins to be forgiven, and so our prayer becomes, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive others," And we may think of how we would like to avoid falling into the trials of temptation but as we pray this prayer we realize that there are countless others who seek to avoid temptation and so we pray, "Lead us not into temptation."

Don't you find that remarkable? In the one prayer where Jesus pauses to teach his followers how to pray, he does so in a way that keeps us always mindful that we are not alone, that we are part of a community, a "Beloved Community." What a magnificent duty and privilege it is to stand before God, not just on our behalf, but on behalf of every man, woman and child created in God's image; to cry to God for the basic things of life that all human beings need.

As Martin Luther once said, "The Lord's Prayer binds the people together, and knits them one to another, so that one prays for another and together with one another." And as modern day theologian James Cone tells us, "To be Christian and human means developing a perspective on life that includes all people."

I find this to be so important because we are losing our sense of community. We are working, thinking, and functioning too much as individuals, focused on

my projects, my needs and interests, my way of thinking, rather than acting in the community's interest. In this, the prayer Jesus taught, he challenges us to reach beyond our individual sphere of concern and become connected to God's greater world.

For a moment, let's turn the picture upside down. When we pray this prayer, we are also reminded that even when we are the outsider, we are included. Sometimes we may find that we are outside because of our wealth, our politics, our religious denomination, our sex or our sexuality, our disabilities, or our illness. When this happens we discover in this prayer that we are not alone in our journey. It is to "Our Father" that we pray together. We are bound and knit together because of this prayer.

When we use the word, "Our," we are reminded that no one can claim God as his or her father alone, to the exclusion of others. This week I was speaking to a member of this congregation who was saying that her parents were members of the a different church and she was having a hard time because she wanted to defended her desire to be a part of this church, which is open, welcoming and inclusive. Her parents argued that there is only one way to understand and practice Christian faith, that they somehow had the final answer, the ultimate truth, and anything else was incomplete.

The prayer of Jesus, however, speaks against that type of spiritualistic individualism and egotism. The love of God is not limited to one community or point of view. When we say this prayer, we cannot exclude any one from the circle of the prayer.

The prayer itself embraces the whole of creation, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

As we join our voices together and pray, "Our Father," we begin to understand the world God has created and we begin to connect with the people God loves. This is the wisdom and genius of this prayer. It is then that we begin to understand the rich spirituality of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, that only when we come to understand that we are part of one global family, sharing our basic human needs together, can we bring hope to our lives, and to the lives of all humanity and indeed, all of creation.

**This sermon delivered by
Kent Winters-Hazelton
First Presbyterian Church
2415 Clinton Parkway
Lawrence, KS 66047**