

Psalm 27:1-5  
Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
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Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

## The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. *Matthew 6:9-13*

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.' *Luke 11:2-4*

Prayer, the Church's banquet, Angel's age,  
God's breath in man returning to his birth,  
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,  
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;  
Engine against th' Almightye, sinner's towre,  
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,  
The six-daies world transposing in an houre,  
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;  
Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,  
Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,  
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,  
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,  
Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the soul's blood,  
The land of spices; something understood.

*George Herbert, 1593-1633*

Of all prayers prayed by us, and by the family of Christians throughout the world, the Lord's Prayer is the most used and the most cherished. And because it is so common it is most subject to become overly familiar and thereby rote.

This past week, while driving here and there, I listened to some fascinating lectures on basic physics by the late Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman to his undergraduate students at Caltech. He mentioned one thing in passing that I found quite stunning. For all we can say about energy—and we can characterize it in many ways as gravity, kinetic, chemical, nuclear, and so on—we still don't know what it is. We can describe what it does, and apply working equations, but we can't describe its essence. The same can be said of our chief way of communicating with God, which is prayer. Like energy, we can talk about prayer's many manifestations, but we cannot touch its essence. It's finally a great mystery, but we know its effects, and we can't function as Christians without it.

Peter Gomes, Chaplain of Harvard's Memorial Chapel, once invited then Bishop Desmond Tutu to speak there. It was in the sixties when passions for civil rights ran high and apartheid still hung like a toxic cloud over South Africa. The Harvard Chapel was packed with activists determined to do something, and to do it here and now. You could have ignited the energy in that place with a match. Dr. Gomes welcomed and introduced the good bishop to thunderous, standing applause, which did not die down for several minutes. Then the diminutive church leader stood, and in that lilting, musical, almost hypnotic voice, he said, "I'm going to tell you all what you most need to hear, the single most important thing you can do for South Africa." The sanctuary fell silent as the grave as they waited, ready to follow him at any cost.

“Pray,” he said softly. “Pray for my people. Pray with us and for us, daily. Pray. That’s what you can do. That will change the world.” And it did!

The *Lord’s Prayer*, a common Protestant term, may not be the best because it isn’t Jesus’ own prayer but the one he taught us. As a young pastor I recall standing outside a busy hospital room asking an aged catholic priest if we might pray together. He said, without hesitation, “Let’s pray the *Our Father*.” Which strikes me as perfect. It signaled our solidarity in the faith. The whole church is caught up in that pronoun *our*.

*Our* prayer is first, and in all things, addressed to God.

For *Father* Jesus used the most personal and intimate Aramaic word that’s best rendered “daddy”—*Pappa*. Some have found “Father” difficult because their human father was a poor role model, or worse. Yet “Father” on Jesus lips speaks to his experience of the ideal of parenthood. This is human speech, and human words are all we have.

*Our Father who art in heaven*. All life begins in the womb of God. This is the one from whom we come, and to whom we return.

Then three affirmations of God’s supreme role in our lives:

(1) *Hallowed or Holy be your name*. We come from perfection into this temporal, frail, and characteristically suspect human shell. So—that God still embraces us in all our limping frailty is beyond our comprehension. We stand always at the perilous interface of what God has made us, and what we make ourselves. Yet this is what the *Holy One* does, embraces us whether in our prodigal or near perfect moments.

God’s is not merely a good *name*, but *the* good name. The name of God deserves reverence and respect. We would not likely use our earthly parent’s name as a casual expletive.

(2) *Your kingdom come*. This is a radical prayer in the extreme. May your reign in our lives replace everything that has no place in us as standard bearers of your presence, a people who take Jesus’ name for our identity. Christ-ians.

(3) *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. From the prayer’s first word, *our*, we may not demarcate between earth and heaven in terms of what we work for. This earthly Christian life is not a place of refuge only, a sanctuary in a sometimes wretched world, it is a crucible for wreaking change on the level of reconstructing earth and its people heaven-like.

*On earth* shifts our focus from Heaven, which we strive to emulate here, to earth. And as earthbound creatures Jesus gives us three things to pray for, not privately for ourselves but three petitions for all humanity. We pray to *Our* father.

(1) *Give us this day our daily bread*. We still do not know what the word means that we translate “daily.” It surfaces only one other time in all of ancient literature as the first word in a fragment of a cook’s household account book. But daily seems right. One day at a time. The Israelites had to gather manna in the wilderness each morning, because this “bread of heaven spoiled overnight. Bread does not keep. And “no man has independent means,” says Buttrick. All the provender of the earth is a gift from God’s hand to be thankful for. Asking with thanks for the food we eat, and pausing with thanks over it, connects us to the benevolent process of life and grace and mysterious providence of God’s earth over which we have no real control.

(2) *Forgive us our debts*. Debts is the Jewish word for *sins*.

*Our debts*. We live as debtors on the earth. We live off loans accrued throughout our lives. All our days are borrowed against eternity. All our needs and interactions borrow from whatever unseen human hands across the globe supply us in terms of our food, energy sources, material goods, and the ideas that shape our world. All our personal ‘gifts’ are just that. We are seldom self-made people. A talent may be honed but the gift is God’s. When we sin, therefore, it is always against God, our neighbor, and ourselves. the three are inextricable.

Our ‘debts.’ We live as debtors on and to the earth. We live off the heritage of loans from earlier generations accrued through life. All our days are borrowed against eternity. All our needs interact with what others supply—our food, implements, technology, culture, homes and civic buildings, educational heritage more so now than ever before in history. All our personal “gifts” are givens, seldom self made *ex nihilo*—out of nothing. A talent may be honed, but the gift is our Maker’s. When we sin it is always against the trinity of God-self-and others, three inextricably. There is so much in this unfinished, imperfect legacy that we can and should change, but we become preoccupied, stumbling over our own agendas A firestorm of hunger is raging in the stomachs of millions worldwide because we divert more grain from shipments to the starving poor to supplement the 15% ethanol in our gas tanks. Which reminds me of the woman in Archibald MacLeish’s play,

“Panic,” who, on hearing word breaking on the news of a depression and unemployment, cried out, “Forgive us our daily bread!”

“Give us our bread and forgive us our debts”—if it weren’t for grammar’s punctilious insistence on a comma between the two, bread and forgiveness would take on the power of two essentials indivisible. Bread & forgiveness. Life, to be good, needs little more.

*As we have forgiven our debtors.* I have said in times past that God forgives us to the degree that we are willing to forgive. I believe, now, that I was wrong. God does not bend tirelessly over musty ledger accounts, scratching away with a scrivener’s pen. If that were the case, salvation would be by landing a hairsbreadth on the credit side of the ledger. Grace through faith is what saves us, what brings us home, doing what we cannot achieve on our own.

This prayer is given to believers. As Tom Long puts it, “if you do not practice forgiveness, you are rejecting your own identity and saying, ‘I know longer want to be a citizen of the kingdom.’” When General Oglethorpe blustered to John Wesley, “I never forgive!” Wesley rightly responded, “Then I hope, sir, you never sin.”

(3) *And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one*—more traditionally, “lead us not into temptation.” But as recent scholarship proposes it should read (from new manuscript evidence), “and do not let us be tempted *by the evil one.*” For it’s always troubled me that God would lead us into temptation. Instead, let us not put ourselves at risk to temptation.

Early Christians later added the ascription: *For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.* That a small, persecuted church should choose to add that ascription is an extravagant testimony to the love of God they felt so powerfully, even unto death and the loss of all earthly things. *For thine is the kingdom and the power* cannot refer to something yet to be. That would be absurd. It would say that God is not yet able. As God said to the terrified Moses in the wilderness, from the burning bush when Moses asked, “Who are you?” God said, “I am who I am.” There is no imperfect tense here. As the natives said to Livingstone about the great Zambezi River, which appeared to the missionary to have dried up: “By sand it is covered”—that is, temporarily it only appears not to be there. They knew that the great river was simply out of sight, and that it would reemerge as surely as the rain season.

So will the Kingdom of God, blooming steadfastly here and there, wherever we have planted it.

Amen