



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Our Father, Who Art in Heaven”

Part I of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Pray Then in This Way.”

Isaiah 55:8-11, Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18

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Last Sunday, Elizabeth beautifully introduced our sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer. Today, the first Sunday of Lent, we begin our sacred journey, phrase by phrase, through the prayer Jesus taught us to pray; the prayer we call *The Lord’s Prayer*.

Before we begin, I want to reflect on a Lenten practice.

Giving something up for Lent is an ancient discipline that people follow for different reasons. Sometimes, what is given up is unhealthy, or addictive; or is something that has grown out of proportion in one’s life. A friend of mine announced on Facebook this past Tuesday that he is giving up social media for Lent because it has consumed too much of his time... and happiness.

Others, though, give up something good and life-giving. Life is a gift that becomes something we take for granted. Maybe denying oneself of something life-giving for a period of time will remind one of life’s fragility and that we should value and give thanks for what sustains us day by day.

In our passage from Matthew, Jesus brings up fasting. He criticizes those who fast as a way of drawing attention to themselves. But he supports fasting as a spiritual practice as evidenced by his 40 day fast in the wilderness. Why? One needs food to live. *Others* need food to live. By fasting, one grows more in tune with one’s own hunger and needs... and one grows more in tune with the world’s hungers and needs. Then, when the fast is broken, bread is no longer simple sustenance. Bread—food—becomes a gift to be savored, a blessing to be shared and, at the right times, a sacramental reminder of God’s grace.



Elizabeth rightly pointed out that we are not giving up the Lord's Prayer for Lent. We are going to savor the prayer, phrase by phrase—break it down to go deeper into its meaning. What we are giving up during Lent is reciting the Lord's Prayer during Sunday worship. We will let hunger for the prayer grow so that on Easter Sunday, we can pray it together again with not only greater understanding but greater appreciation for its life-sustaining power.

So, let's now consider the phrase, "**Our Father, who art in Heaven.**" Let's begin by heeding the words of the prophet Isaiah and then the words of Jesus.

Isaiah 55:8-11:

"My thoughts are not your thoughts,
and my ways are not your ways," declares the LORD.
"Just as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so my ways are higher than your ways,
and my thoughts are higher than your thoughts."

New Testament: Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18

⁶ "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷ "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

¹⁶ "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"Pray then like this: "**Our Father, who art in heaven.**"

Notice the first word of the prayer. This prayer does not begin "*My* Father." It begins, "*Our* Father." This prayer can be prayed alone, but even more it is a prayer to be prayed by a community.



This can be confusing when you consider what Jesus says just before teaching this prayer. You heard it when I read our New Testament lesson. Before teaching disciples *how* to pray, Jesus teaches them how *not* to pray. “When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love treating street corners and synagogues as a stage where they can be seen. The attention is their reward. When you pray, pray in secret.”

As a former actor, I don’t like it that the word Jesus uses for “hypocrites” can just as easily be translated “actors.” It can, though, and Jesus is saying, “When you pray, don’t pretend to be something you are not just to get attention.”

Pray in secret when you are to say, “Our Father?” This can only be reconciled when you understand that praying in secret is not the same as praying alone. Praying in secret is praying with integrity, where honesty and humility are the sacrifices the individual or the community offers to God. Praying as a hypocrite can be attention-seeking as Jesus said. It can also be drawing on God’s name for one’s own designs: bringing God into a deal, as an endorser... maybe even into a fight.

I remember a liturgy being offered in a worship service of a larger church gathering where everyone was asked to recite a prayer that clearly was a partisan rant. A respectable theologian later said to the one who wrote the liturgy, “I would appreciate it if you did not triangle God into our disagreements.”

But though Jesus wants prayer to be offered with honesty and humility, he certainly did not go on to teach a prayer to be offered alone. In fact, the Lord’s Prayer, offered as it is to “Our Father” is a prayer of a community praying for the world. Let me say that again. Whether, prayed alone or together, *The Lord’s Prayer is the prayer of a community praying for the world.*

Keep that in mind as we look at the remainder of the first phrase of the prayer.

Some think of the phrase, “Our Father Who Art in Heaven” as simply a salutation, a way of addressing God. Well, it is sort of like that.

Sort of like that, but not really, because who says, “Dear Mom in Montreat,” or “Dear Ed in Raleigh,” or “Dear Senator Warner in Washington?” No, we begin this prayer by praying to *Who* and *Where*, and in doing so we embrace a tension.

Who: “Our Father.”

Where: “In Heaven.”

“Father” is an intimate term. God is as near to us as a Father who scolds us for misbehaving and as near to us as a Father embracing the Prodigal Son who expected condemnation, not a kiss and a hug.

To address God as “Father” is not to say that God is male, for male and female are created in God’s image. But given that any language about God is inadequate and there is, and never will be, a perfect way to speak of God, to call God “Father” is at least to say that faith at its heart is personal, not functional. Sure, we rightfully think of God having functions—the church has trumpeted the functions of *Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer* most of all—but to limit God to functions—to



limit God to what God *does*—is to diminish God in the way we diminish others when we limit them to what they do: just a waiter, just a plumber, just a policeman, just a politician.

If the nature of God is love,
and if the work of God *goes beyond* creating a world and sustaining it
to the deeply *personal* work of judgement and reconciliation—
the healing of broken lives and relationships—
and if we hope for a personal salvation—
well then let's not think of God as one to be summoned for services,
to fulfill those functions that we use as names for him.

To begin a prayer with “Father” is not to begin perfectly,
but it is to begin within a relationship;
a relationship that is not equal,
for God is the parent and we are children,
but a relationship that is defined by love.

Now, knowing that God is near to us as Father, remember that this is *the prayer of a community praying for the world*. In praying for the world's needs we draw nearer to God. Jesus made this clear when he said, “**As you did or did not unto the least of these—the hungry, the imprisoned, the sick, the homeless—you did or did not unto me.**”

God was as near to us on the mission trip as were the patients on the operating table or visiting the clinics out in the barrios. *And*, God was as near to the Dominicans as were we who needed their leadership, friendship and prayer.

So, in praying “Our Father,” we pray to a God who is near to us.

But we haven't finished the phrase, have we? “Our Father *who art in heaven.*” And there's the tension I talked about. The Father

whose approval we want,
whose embrace we desire, whose guidance we need,
and whose love we live for
is a God in heaven...

apart from us,
beyond our reach,
beyond our control,
beyond our defining,
and sometimes, to be honest,
beyond our *finding*.

Sometimes we pray to a Father who seems to be an absentee dad.

The Bible presents this God who is distant and beyond our reach and control as forcefully as the God who draws near. Isaiah expresses it vividly, “**My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither**



are my ways your ways,” says the Lord. “Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

We may always want God within hearing of the snap of our fingers, but God is far too old to change his ways. You know how it is, when someone needs space. Well, the one whom even all of space cannot contain certainly cannot be contained by us.

But *we* also need space too, don't we? Human identity depends on it. Moral and spiritual growth normally happen in the struggle of trying to bridge gaps:

The Gap between question and answer,
or answers and acceptance,
between who we are and who we need to become,
between selfishness and selflessness,
between hatred and love,
between fear of death and joy in life.

We cannot bridge the spiritual maturity gaps without things within us stretching, bending and even breaking.

This is the Bible's truth. Most of scripture comes from Israel's chapters of instability and struggle; chapters of transition, loss and upheaval. The Old Testament mostly came together in the chapter of exile as people searched for their place and purpose in the world having lost everything they thought mattered most: a Temple (their mainline religious identity), a national identity with a king to rule them and a God who was supposed to protect them. The New Testament came of enormous upheaval when the people of God exploded beyond ethnic barriers and national borders that made so much sense of life. Yes, there is a positive way to think of God's distance.

But there is a hard side, too. Distance, to be transformative, must be real... and that means risk and danger. God can never seem more distant than

in the needless suffering of a child,
or when a nation supposedly protected by God falls apart,
or in the moments when one yearns for any word at all from God...
a Word of direction, or hope or even of rescue...
and the Word does not come.

The God who is beyond our defining,
the God who will not be reshaped in our image,
the God who is beyond our manipulative control,
the God whose mind encompasses the needs of the universe,
is also the God who is beyond *the responses we think God owes us*.

And then this needs to be said: There is that distance between us and God that *we* create with our sin,

- As when we arrogantly ignore God because we think we are god enough;
- As when our daily bread becomes the bread we hoard while others starve;



- As when the reconciliation we seek from God is denied others;
- As when in our shame we refuse to hear any good word from God because we have done something— or become something— that makes us, we think, unworthy of God’s time.

It is for healing and reconciling that the Lord’s Prayer *most needs* to be a prayer of the community praying for the world. We really need the God who is in heaven to come near to us to heal the divides among us.

There *is* tension in this prayer, but there is also a saving irony. The irony is that the one teaching us the Lord’s Prayer—Jesus—is the one in whom God’s distance and intimacy meet. Jesus is the human expression of the transcendent God

- sharing with us our human needs (“**I thirst,**” he said from the cross),
- having the same human desires (“**Take this cup away from me,**” he prayed in the garden),
- and asking the same human questions (“**My God, why have you forsaken me?**” he asked while dying).

Jesus is the one in whom meets the distance created by sin and the intimacy created in reconciliation. That tension is Jesus’ very identity and life.

The Lord’s Prayer has power when it is prayed in the tension. The prayer is not for those who want God on a leash ready to do their bidding, but for those who have the whole world’s needs in mind and seek to follow God’s bidding. This is the community that will experience in this prayer both urgency in asking much of God and the urgency of God asking much of us.

