

**First Presbyterian Church
Matthew 6:9, “Our Father”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 10/1/2017**

This fall, as part our Worship into Life grant project
we are turning from our summer focus on gathered worship
to the more individual focus of personal spiritual development,
or, more poetically, being Formed in Silence.
Along the way I’ve suggested that gathered worship and personal formation
are intimately related, feeding each other in a virtuous cycle.

So far we have looked at the spiritual life of Jacob – that trickster who
was so bold in his desire for blessing
that he literally wrestled with God!

Then we considered the spiritual life of Hannah – who called out to God
in the midst of her pain (especially in worship).
But that pain and prayer began a
wonderful era in the life of Israel through
the birth of her son Samuel.

Last week Kate explored the spiritual life of Moses – who possessed
a very ordinary kind of greatness,
and God told him that his ordinary excuses
were not going to get in the way of God’s great plan.

For the next few weeks,
we’re going to consider the spirituality of Jesus
in the form that he gave it to his disciples.

When Jesus’ disciples asked him how they should pray,
he taught them a prayer
that has only fifty-seven words in the original Greek.

Jesus taught his disciples fifty-seven words that change the world.

Did you hear that? Fifty-seven words...that change the world.

Do they, though?

It is hard for me to believe that prayer changes the world.
For instance, I don't like being pressed down into weird possibility
where God "answered" my prayer
by opening up a parking space,
but at the same time God didn't "answer" someone else's prayer
for healing cancer or restoring a broken relationship.
In that analysis, God has time for trivial things,
but not important things.

I often hear an attractive solution to this problem:
prayer changes the person who prays,
more than the people or situations that are prayed for.

I would agree that I am changed by God when I pray,
but is that really *all* that happens in prayer?

To be honest, if I'm the only person changed by my prayers,
then I'm going to be a lot less ambitious in presenting my requests
to God next time.

As I see it, the prayer-as-personal-therapy approach is out of step with
the kind of prayers and effects that we find in the Bible.

But, really, we don't have proof of how this prayer stuff works.
So in the end, then, I am left to pray with *faith*. Imagine that.
Faith that God hears, faith that God cares,
faith that God is able to intervene in the real world,
and faith that prayer matters
for the things that matter.

Today is World Communion Sunday.
We've been singing songs from around the world,
during communion we will partake in breads
from around the world,
and in the Lord's prayer we share in a prayer
that is prayed by more than a billion Christians all around the world.

What happens when the body of Christ around the world calls out to God?

The book of Revelation offers an inspiring perspective on what happens when we pray.

Revelation is not always as bizarre as its reputation,
so bear with me here.

In Revelation 6 – 8,

the author, John, peeks into what happens in heaven
when God's people pray on earth.

As he looks around, John sees a mysterious scroll sealed with seven seals.

As each seal is opened, someone *prays*.

When the seventh seal is opened,
it says there was *silence* in heaven for thirty minutes.

Silence in heaven. This is surprising because earlier in the book
we learn that angels have been singing "Holy, Holy, Holy,"
day and night since the creation of the world.

But when this scroll is opened there is silence in heaven.

Why?

In the midst of the silence, John reports,

**"An angel who had a golden censer came and stood at the altar.
He was given much incense to offer
with the prayers of God's people
on the golden altar before the throne.
The smoke of the incense,
together with the prayers of God's people,
went up before God from the angel's hand."**

God smells this prayer aroma,

people crying for help, their requests that he move into action.

After this, Revelation describes,

God begins to do *all kinds of things on earth*.

Think about this: the prayers of God's people are so significant
in what God is doing that the eternal service of worship in heaven
is put on hold, an angel presents the prayers
with incense before God and *these prayers*
are the catalyst for God's activity on earth.

I take this insight from Darrell Johnson, whose book,
“Fifty Seven Words That Change the World”
is my primary resource for this sermon series.

Darrell writes, “When we pray the Lord’s Prayer,
we participate in the transformation of the world.” REPEAT

I would bring that into our situation by saying
that when we pray the Lord’s Prayer (or any other prayer)
we open ourselves to the unlimited resources
of God’s Kingdom so that a small, urban,
21st century church in McMinnville
can expect to find evidence of God’s
activity all over the place in our lives.

If we are a praying people there is no limit
to what God can do in us and through us.

Jesus begins his prayer like this:
“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”

“Our Father.”

The way Jesus begins this prayer is a tremendous gift.
He begins by including his disciples (and us)
in his own relationship with his Father in heaven.

He doesn’t invite us to pray to “the Father of Jesus,”
or to “his heavenly Father.”
We are invited to pray, “*Our* Father.”

That’s an astonishing invitation.

Let’s remember that this prayer comes
smack in the middle of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount
found in the book of Matthew.

In Matthew’s gospel
Jesus constantly makes reference to his Father.

For example, we hear Jesus say things like this:

11:27 **“All things have been committed to me by my Father.
No one knows the Son except the Father,
and no one knows the Father except the Son
and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.**

Now, for Jesus to speak of the One who sent him as Father
doesn't tell us about God's gender,
it tells us about the extraordinary closeness of their relationship.

In fact, when we pray, “Our Father,”
we are assured that the Father shares
the exact character and temperament of Jesus.

Do you believe that?
God the Father shares the exact character and temperament of Jesus.

This also means that by praying “Our Father,”
we are entering into the eternal relationship
between the first and second persons of the Trinity.

“Our Father.” That's quite a way to start a prayer.

But Jesus also invites us to pray to Our Father “in heaven.”

Our Father “in heaven” implies that God
has the ability to grant what it is he wants to give us.

Parents on earth want to do many things for their children,
but they are quite limited by their resources of time, attention,
money, ability, and so on.

This is not the case for the parent we pray to.
For God sits on his throne in the heavens.
God is King in the heavens.
Having a Father *in heaven*,
means we have a Father who is all powerful.

Our Father ... in heaven. So far, so good.

But the next thing Jesus teaches us is more mysterious,
 “Hallowed be your name.”

Let’s begin by looking at what we mean by God’s “name.”

We live in a world of credit checks and résumés and account balances.

 Whether your name is Gertrude or Bubba
 or Preston or Julia or Donald,

external things determine your place in the world.

 The letters of your name itself is irrelevant.

What counts is the list of attributes and acquisitions.

 The name “Bill Gates” is exceedingly plain apart from these things.

But in the ancient world a person’s actual *name* was very important.

 A person’s name carried in it their reputation and their character.

And so, it’s no surprise that in the Bible, God is given many names:

Primarily Yahweh—I Am, which implies

 “I am here with you and I am here for you.”

There is also El Shaddai—the mighty God

 El Roi—the God who sees

 El Rophe—the God who heals.

 And there are many others.

To go further with this,

 God has revealed his name not just in what he is called,
 but also in what he has done.

So we pray to the God who saved Israel from slavery,

 the God who spoke to Moses and the prophets,

 the God who atones for and forgives our sin.

Taking this ancient approach to things,

 when we pray regarding God’s *name*,

 we are referring to much more than a set of letters or sounds.

We are actually referring God’s own *character* and *reputation* in the world.

 God’s name is God’s character and reputation in the world.

Which leaves us with one last word to understand in this petition:

Hallowed.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”

To be totally honest with you, I’ve never really known what this means.

Is anybody else with me here?

Whatever it means to “Hallow” something,

the only time I run into it

outside this prayer is “Halloween.”

It turns out that the verb “hallow” literally means to make holy.

To hallow something is to holy-fy it.

It’s related to the word translated “sanctify.”

But God’s name, God’s reputation and character in the world,

is already holy. How can it be made more holy?

How can it be hallowed?

Ezekiel 36:23 tells us. It reads,

“Then the nations will know that I am Yahweh,”

declares Yahweh the Sovereign,

“when I am proved holy *through you* before their eyes.”

God’s name is hallowed or “proved holy”

when divine purposes are put on display

for the world to see through his people.

The hallowing, the making holy, of God’s name

isn’t something that happens in the abstract or theoretical,

it happens right down here where we live, struggle, and breathe.

Only God can demonstrate on earth the holiness of his name,

only God can reveal his true character

but what an amazing thing that he chose to do it through Israel:

“The nations will know that I am Yahweh

when I am proved holy *through you* before their eyes.”

“Our Father...in heaven...hallowed be your name.”

One last insight:

The verb “Hallow,” along with every other verb in this prayer,
is used in the imperative form.

The imperative is used for commands—

like “Be gone,” instead of requests like,

“Will you please get something for me?”

Because of this, in the First Century when Jesus lived, subordinates
were never allowed to use the imperative toward their superiors.

And yet, Jesus teaches us (subordinates) to pray to God (our superior)
with *commands*.

Darrell Johnson says the prayer could be translated like this:

Be hallowed, your name.

Come, your kingdom.

Be done, your will.

These are not requests they are commands.

Darrell then writes,

“Only God can do what we are asking to have done.

Only God can bring his kingdom.

Only God can do his will.

The prayer is not “let *us* bring your Kingdom,” or “let *us* do your will.”

The prayer is, “Father *you do it.*”

We are asking God to do what only God can do.

We are “commanding” that God do

what only God can do.

We might be involved;

indeed we *want* to be involved

in the process of the kingdom coming.

But *we* are not the ones making it come.”

Isn’t that amazing? When we pray, “Hallowed be your name,”
we aren’t telling God that *we* will muster up the effort to praise him,
that *we* have what it takes to expand
his character and reputation on earth.

Instead, we’re telling God to do something.

regardless of our ability to do it on our own.

So let's take all of this together.

The way we do this is

we pray God's self revelation about his name back to him
in light of what we've learned from Jesus.

God provided a ram for Abraham

so he wouldn't have to sacrifice his own son,

and Abraham called the place, "Yahweh will provide."

So we can pray like this:

"Father, you've invited us into your eternal life of relationship,
and you can give us every good thing that we need.

Prove yourself to be a provider in our lives

and expand your reputation

as the one who supplies what we need.

Hallow your name."

In the book of Acts, God revealed to Peter

that he is making a one people composed of Jews and Gentiles

and that Peter was not to stand in the way of this.

Pray that back to God:

"Father, today is World Communion Sunday.

Show in us your desire for a united people from many backgrounds.

Demonstrate your character as the God of all nations,

display your reputation for reconciliation

in our congregation and help us to expand that
reputation in Yamhill County.

Hallow your name here."

This is what it means to pray,
“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”

And so, a congregation who follows Jesus by praying the way he did
can have every confidence in their mission.
We’re just asking God to do God’s job.

A family who follows Jesus by asking God’s name
to be hallowed in their home
can have every confidence that relationships can be healed.

An individual who follows Jesus
by asking God’s name to be hallowed in their life
can have every confidence that their own Father in Heaven
will do what only he *can do* in them and in their world.