

The Lord's Prayer: Part 1

A Reflection for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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So this month we're going to take a deep dive into the Lord's Prayer. You may have heard of it - you may even have memorized it. Or, maybe it's a new prayer to you or your family. This deep dive is for Lord's prayer newcomers and those who've had it memorized for eighty years, because this month we want to be intentional about each word and phrase in the Lord's Prayer.

In our house, we pray the Lord's prayer every night at bedtime - and sometimes afterward we add in some "God blesses" - prayers for particular people or situations. Sometimes, we'll read an adaptation like the one we prayed this morning from New Zealand - but to be honest, it's too long to memorize. So we come back to the standard version - or, at least, the Girash-standard version which we have come to after a lot of family conversations. We begin with Our Creator, and conclude with thine is the kin-dom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. We have a pretty regular rhythm and cadence, and there's comfort to that. One night I noticed that one of us was using a different rhythm, and it threw me off - so I asked why. Because, came the reply, I want to be intentional about the words - not just falling into a standard recitation.

This is a prayer that Christians have prayed since Jesus first taught it - and like a few other sacred Christian practices, it's universal for all Christians. On the other hand, nothing - other than following Jesus - is truly universal for all Christians throughout time and place.

As John Dominic Crossan puts it, this is "a prayer... on the lips of Christianity, for the conscience of the world...hymn of hope for all humanity in language addressed to all the earth."¹

So today I just want to talk about the first two words of the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father.

Our.

Why is that important?

¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer*. p. 2

It's important for three reasons.

When Jesus taught this prayer in Matthew, he was in the midst of teaching how people should live in the community of the church. The model of prayer Jesus taught with these words is a model of community prayer. This is the community praying together. That doesn't mean we shouldn't *also* pray our own individual prayers, but this prayer is about how we as the church - and as Christians in community - relate to God and build the world that God envisions. And this has been a core prayer of Christianity for 2000 years so we are praying with people across time and place. This is Our prayer.

This is Our prayer, too, when Jesus himself is included. Nijay Gupta says, "When we pray the Lord's Prayer, Jesus is not just inviting us to pray...after him, but also to pray it with him."²

Finally, if this is Our prayer, prayed in community and prayed with Jesus - then we are siblings with Jesus and siblings with each other, with everyone who prays this prayer, relating to Our Father.

Our Father.

Who are we praying to?

With the first words of the prayer he taught us, Jesus showed that we are praying to someone with whom we have a close relationship, who cares for us as individuals and as a whole human community.

We are praying with words that Jesus used again and again, that map on to prayers from the Hebrew Bible that he was so steeped in. Abba - the Aramaic that we'd say, "poppy" - Pater - the Greek for father.

John Dominic Crossan (I'll be quoting him a lot this month) says Father isn't an exclusive term - pointing to places in the Bible where father means parent - but Crossan also says Father here refers to an idea much bigger just a dad. He says God is in this sense a householder - someone in charge of a home and an extended family system. God is the householder of the world and when we pray Our Father, we should be thinking not of a particularly gendered God, but of our Creator, our Protector, our Provider, and our Model - and I'd add, the one who has loved us always. So, we may

² Nijay K. Gupta, *The Lord's Prayer: Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*. 2017. pps. 29-30

say Our Father or Our Creator - with the understanding that it points us to all of the amazing aspects of God.

When you pray this prayer with intention, you may find yourself praying

Our Father

Abba

Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God (New Zealand)

Padre nuestro

Or as our siblings at Middle Church in New York pray,

Ever-loving and holy God,

However you pray it - and you are welcome to use the words that are authentic to you - pray together with Christians throughout time and place, and pray to the one who is our creator, our protector, our model, the one who is ever loving and holy. Amen.