

Just a couple weeks ago I was sitting in a car driving with a young funeral director on the way to a cemetery, talking about a variety of topics about each of our professions, our upbringings and everything in between. In the course of our conversation she was quite open about the fact that she was more agnostic than a person of faith, despite having deeply faithful grandparents and a parents who were still involved in their local Baptist church. This wasn’t an altogether shocking statement since many of us know of brothers and sisters or children and grandchildren that have been raised around people of deep faith that have fallen away, however what was shocking was that she admitted to having memorized both the 23 Psalm and the Lord’s Prayer. I suppose I shouldn’t have been too caught off guard by this, since after all these are two of the most common passages of Scripture – and yes the Lord’s prayer, as we just heard is a passage from Scripture – read at funerals. She had heard the Lord’s Prayer enough times, at enough funerals (a morbid thought perhaps) that the prayer had become engrained within her memory, even though the prayer had no meaning to her.

I suppose in one way it’s a good thing that this young woman has these important words of Scripture in her memory, but I think her story is indicative of how many people approach the Lord’s Prayer, it is just part of the script, it is just something to memorize and recite uncritically, without any thought as to what we are praying for as we say this prayer and why we are praying it. As a kid growing up I certainly can relate, I learned the prayer with no understanding of what it meant or what I was asking for, except that I understood it was something that we do in church and it was something I should do. This is ok for children, although I’s argue that kids can understand more than we give them credit for, but as we grow up in faith, I think it is incumbent upon us to understand what it is we are praying, and why it is we pray in this particular way, week in and week out.

While we all have different levels of understanding about the Lord’s Prayer, some of us may have studied it in depth and perhaps some others of us might be saying it for the first, it is nonetheless a prayer for all us, it is not a prayer for select Christians but for the whole Church. Since this prayer is a prayer for all of us, over the next four weeks we will explore the rich depth to this prayer that has only 10 lines. Each week we will explore a section or two of the prayer, paired with a passage of Scripture that allows us to go further in depth into the meaning of the prayer we pray day in and day out, week after week. My hope is that as we explore the prayer, both through the words of scripture, through proclamation and for those who are studying it in our study sessions and most of all through praying it together that we might enrich and expand our common worship.

In the Bible, we have two accounts of Jesus teaching the Lord’s Prayer to his disciples, one in Matthew and the other in the passage from Luke we heard read this morning. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus teaches them the prayer as part of the Sermon on the Mount, following some basic instructions about how to pray. Prayer is not about boasting and standing out but rather about developing a secret inn relationship with God. Prayer is not about stringing together beautiful and eloquent words, but rather about simplicity and sincerity. In our passage from Luke, he teaches them the prayer in response to their request to teach them to pray. The disciples knew that prayer was important, however they struggled with their own prayers and so they asked Jesus to teach them to pray.

Despite the different settings for teaching the prayer, in both accounts the prayer is taught in contrast to other forms of prayer and so in both accounts Jesus is intending to give us a prayer which should inform the whole of our prayer life, our whole relationship with God. Jesus gives us this prayer as a way to keep his teachings, as a key to understanding the whole thrust of the Gospel message. Compared to other prayers, the Lord’s Prayer is brief, it is a prayer that any of us can learn, to us together or in private in that secret room of our hearts. While the prayer is brief it is nonetheless robust and gives us a framework for the whole of our prayer life. The prayer begins with us adoring God, it moves to a prayer of obedience, then to a prayer for our daily needs, then a prayer for forgiveness and finally a prayer for protection and perseverance. While there are certainly other forms of prayer these forms of prayer give us an excellent starting point for how our own daily prayers can be ordered.

In giving us the words of this prayer, Jesus teaches us that God is approachable, that prayer, that this specific prayer is something we can all share. This is confirmed for us in the opening of the prayer, where we call out to “Our Father”. In these first words of the prayer, Jesus invites us to call the Lord God, creator of the universe, of all that seen and unseen, father, he invites us into an approachable an intimate relationship with God. At the very beginning of the prayer we are invited into the same relationship with God, as Jesus, we are invited into the very family of God as brothers and sisters of Jesus. Each of us, no matter who we are, where we’re from or what we’ve done, is invited into this relationship of divine familial love.

While we are invited into this divine relationship, the second clause of the prayer “in heaven, holy is your name” reminds us that there is still a great degree of reverence due to God. We must balance the intimacy of calling God Father, while remembering God’s awesomeness, while remembering that God who we pray to, is the one and only creator of the universe, of everything visible and invisible. We cannot ever be comfortable in our relationship with God, we should never approach God with the contempt of familiarity, we should never take God for granted. I think in prayer we can often be light in the areas of adoration and thanksgiving. We can get caught up in the very good act of intercessory prayer for others and ourselves and forget to marvel and wonder at the awesomeness of God. When we take the Lord’s Prayer seriously then we are left no choice but extol the virtues of God, to give thanks for his wondrous grace and mercy. All of the Christian life is finding a balance between the closeness of being adopted into the family of God as children and remembering our place in the created order and the awesomeness of God. Each of us is invited into the tension of this relationship as we respond to call of Christ in our lives.

But we are not invited into this relationship alone, the prayer that Jesus gave us does not begin with “My Father” but rather “Our Father”. While we may often say this prayer alone, during our prayers in the morning or before bed, we are nonetheless reminded that the Christian faith is not purely an individualistic relationship with God; that the Gospel we proclaim is more than just personal salvation and faith, but that it is also about the community that God’s word creates. We pray this prayer not merely asking for ourselves but also for our brothers and sisters both around us, but also all around the world. Just think that there is probably never a moment during any day where the Lord’s Prayer isn’t being said by someone, somewhere around the world. This is a wonderful thought, to think that no matter when we say the Lord’s Prayer there is likely someone else saying in the world, almost certainly in another language. This is the Church’s family prayer, this is the prayer we say on behalf of ourselves but also for the whole Christian Church. Since this is the Church’s family prayer it should give us comfort that we are not alone in our Christian journey, but it should also continually remind us of the responsibility that we share for our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. We are once again left with a tension, a tension between comfort and responsibility – a hallmark of the Christian life.

And so over the next month, as we explore the Lord’s Prayer, I invite you to live into these tensions: the tension between an intimate relationship with God and a reverent one, the tension between the comfort and the responsibility. I invite you to see the Lord’s Prayer not merely as something to recite day-in and day out, but as something that structure to all of your prayer, as something which in fact shapes the whole your Christian life. Remember that this is the prayer of God’s family, it is the prayer that Jesus taught us, knowing that it can be a struggle to pray, knowing that it can be difficult to live in the midst of the tensions of the Christian life. Brothers and Sisters in Christ in conclusion let us pray as Jesus taught us saying “Our Father...”