

HALLOWED BE THY NAME

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, June 23, 2019
based on Luke 11:1-2, Matthew 6:9, Psalm 135:1-3,13-14***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Teach Us to Pray—the Spiritual Journey of the Lord’s Prayer. Before moving into today’s theme, I should comment about the East Ohio Annual Conference that met a week ago. In the aftermath of the recent special General Conference, the overshadowing issue was how the East Ohio Conference would position itself with regard to the less than fully welcoming attitude that the General Conference had adopted toward LGBTQ persons. We were electing delegates to the next General Conference, which will be in the spring of 2020; those delegates will have the power to change our denomination’s stance in order to create space for churches that are fully welcoming. Our Bishop, Tracy Malone, in her episcopal address, recalled that her ancestors in church used to sing a song in which the words were, “Plenty good room, there’s plenty good room in my Father’s kingdom.” There are many of us in the United Methodist Church who believe that God’s will for our church is that we should be a church in which there is plenty good room—plenty good room for theological conservatives and liberals, plenty good room for people who are single or divorced or married or remarried, plenty good room for people of every race and nationality, plenty good room for people of every sexual orientation and gender identity, plenty good room for all. Prior to Annual Conference, we formed a coalition in East Ohio called “East Ohio Forward,” and East Ohio Forward put forth a slate of recommended delegates who were all in favor of reshaping our denominational rules to make us a church in which there is indeed plenty good room. Seven of the twelve delegates elected to General Conference were from that slate, and ten of the twelve delegates to Jurisdictional Conference, which elects bishops, were from that slate. East Ohio Forward also put forth two resolutions which essentially declared the East Ohio Conference to be in opposition to the policies on human sexuality that were adopted by the General Conference. Those two resolutions were both approved by a majority of the delegates at Annual Conference, but fell short of two-thirds majority required for the resolutions to be officially adopted. All this illustrates the struggle that is going on in our denomination right now. Our own church here in Kent, which is one of the largest churches in our Conference, has positioned our church as one that is fully welcoming toward all.

At the same time, welcoming people is step one. When the church welcomes everyone, it is not yet doing anything distinctive in the world, since, if you want to be welcomed as you are, you could go to a bar, or you could go to Taco Bell. What makes the church distinctive is what we offer as we extend welcome to people—we offer Jesus Christ, and the fullness of what Christ brings for human living.

As we consider the Lord’s Prayer, it is, in a way, a synopsis of what is offered to each one of us through Jesus Christ. Each phrase in the prayer tells us something about God and what our relationship with God can be. In the last installment of this series we focused on the

first two words of the prayer—Our Father. Today we continue with the rest of that opening petition in the prayer, which is found in the gospel of Luke, and again in the sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. (Matthew 6:9) {prayer}

It is notable how the Lord's Prayer begins. Quite often when people pray, the starting point is some problem. They are in a fix, and are looking to God for a rescue. Or the starting point is some need. People look to God to supply something that they or their loved ones require. There is certainly nothing wrong with asking God for help. Later in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus would include a phrase precisely along this line, as he taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." But the Lord's Prayer does not start with our need. It starts with God. The opening petition of the Lord's Prayer is all about who God is, and it lifts up several key attributes of God.

The first phrase, "our Father," pictures the love of God. That image says plainly that God cares for us and loves us unconditionally, as a parent loves a child. It suggests that God is near and that we can share in a close personal relationship with God.

The next phrase expands that picture of God, as it proclaims that God is "in heaven." The word "heaven" denotes a realm that is beyond what we can see or feel. Traditionally people have thought of heaven as "up," since that is beyond us; but now that we can fly on airplanes above the clouds and send rockets to Mars and peer through telescopes into deep space, our concept of heaven has become more sophisticated. We rightfully think of heaven as the spiritual reality that is behind and beyond all the material stuff that we observe with our bodily senses. To say that God is in heaven is to say that God transcends this material world. God surpasses all things; for God created everything and God reigns over all. The declaration that God is in heaven proclaims that there is a power in this universe that far beyond the power of human tyrants and armies, far beyond the power of volcanoes and hurricanes and suns and black holes. It proclaims that God is in charge, and all things are under God's rule.

The opening phrases of the Lord's Prayer thus give us a very comprehensive view of God. The first phrase—our Father—proclaims the unbounded love of God and also proclaims God's immanence—the fact that God is near. The second phrase—who art in heaven—proclaims the unbounded power of God and also proclaims God's transcendence—the fact that God is beyond all things. In this full picture of God, the Lord's Prayer expresses a truth that the prophet Jeremiah had declared when he proclaimed, "Am I a God nearby, says the Lord, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the Lord." (Jeremiah 23:23-24)

People are often inclined to imagine God in ways that make God too small. The Lord's Prayer at its outset would vastly expand our vision. Against every human tendency to imagine that God is distant or aloof, the Lord's Prayer insists that God is close and that God relates to us intimately like a parent. At the same time, against every human tendency to think of God in too chummy or humanized a fashion, the Lord's Prayer proclaims that God is

in heaven, which declares that God is far larger than our limited perceptions, and that God works in ways that may be well beyond our understanding.

The Lord's Prayer in its opening petition thus declares that God is infinitely loving and that God is infinitely powerful, and then in the final phrase of that opening petition it declares that God is infinitely good. The goodness of God is the basic subject of the phrase, "Hallowed be thy name." That phrase might initially strike us as odd. No one uses the word "hallow" any more, except of course when they are saying the word Halloween, which gives it a spooky connotation. The word "hallow" here is an old-timey translation of the original New Testament Greek word, *hagiazzo*, which means to make holy, or to honor something as holy. But what exactly does it mean for something to be holy? Today people often equate "holiness" with being spiritually stuck up, but that is not the idea in the Bible. In Biblical writings, to be "holy" means to be distinct from the wretchedness of the sinful world and to be dwelling in righteousness. To be holy is to be good. Thus the word "Halloween" was originally short for "All Hallows Eve," the night before All Saints Day, which was a time for honoring people who have lived in goodness. We have certainly gotten off course in that holiday. To say that God is holy is to affirm that God is perfectly good.

Beyond the word "hallow," people are also sometimes perplexed by what is meant when it says that we are to hallow God's *name*. Moses once asked what God's name was, while he was standing in front of a burning bush, and he got a surprising answer; for he found that the God speaking to him did not have a proper name like Marduk or Zeus or any of the names of the many gods in the pantheons of the ancient world. In answer to the question, "What is your name?" God answered, "I am." In other words, God is not what human beings had often imagined the gods to be—particular beings who are like people but just on large scale. God is being itself. God is utterly beyond human definition or imagination. We cannot pin God down.

So when the Bible speaks of the name of God, it is not speaking of some limiting term for God; it is speaking simply of God. To honor God's name is to honor God. But the Bible speaks of the "name" of God in order to make clear a fundamental truth—that God has an identity. God is not simply some vague spiritual force. God is a personal reality, to whom we can personally relate, just as we relate to anyone who has a name.

But how then are we to relate to God? How do we rightfully approach a God of infinite love, power, and goodness? In saying, "hallowed be thy name," the Lord's Prayer is leading us to *honor God as the One who is truly holy*. To hallow God's name is to recognize that God is worthy of our highest praise, and to approach God therefore with reverence and worship. As the book of Revelation says, "Who will not revere you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy." (Revelation 15:4)

Precisely here we encounter a major spiritual problem of our time. So often people disregard God and want to hallow all sorts of things other than God. People want to hallow their country or their flag, or their favorite sports team, or their club, treating earthly associations and symbols as though they are worthy of something akin to worship. When the

Lord's Prayer says, "Hallowed be thy name," it relativizes everything else. You may well have an appropriate loyalty to your country, you may rightfully honor the flag, you may cheer for your sports team, and you may be proud of your club; but we are to hallow only God's name. It is God alone that we approach with worship.

So it is that in a world in which people are so often focused upon everything other than God, the Lord's Prayer puts the spotlight directly upon God. In a world in which people often turn to religion only as an afterthought, especially when prompted by some trouble, the Lord's Prayer begins with God. And in a world in which people want to glorify all sorts of earthly things, the Lord's Prayer gives the glory to God alone. Jesus surely knew our human tendency to get off track, which is why he leads us at the start of the Lord's prayer to fix our vision upon God. It is a spiritual movement akin to what Jesus talked about in a nearby phrase in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and then everything else will be added unto you." (Matthew 6:33) We are called by this prayer to begin, not with our needs or our desires or our troubles, but with God, for then everything else will be put in perspective.

The late United Methodist Bishop Lance Webb once told the story of a woman he knew who was upset and distraught about a number of matters. She sought God's help in prayer, but seemed to receive no answer. One day, she went into the sanctuary of her church, where in the quiet she simply turned her thoughts to God. She had an experience that Bishop Webb later described as follows: "As she lifted her heart in adoration before the wonder of God's love and the greatness and might of God's wisdom, she forgot her problems for a moment. When she came back once more to think of all that had been distressing her, she saw everything in a new light and received a new courage and strength to meet it. Thus it was that she said, 'I must first not ask but adore.'"ⁱ

This is precisely how the Lord's Prayer teaches us to begin—not with asking God for things, but with "adoration," that is, with a reverent focus upon the character and the glory of God. It is in the light of God, and the recognition of who God is, that we then can see all of our needs and all of our opportunities with a new vision.

In the presence of God, for example, we gain a proper perspective on many of the things that have been agitating us in life. Those plants in your garden that have been getting chewed up by critters, those scratches that have appeared on your car, that bill that arrived that was a lot bigger than what you were expecting—all these sorts of things have the capacity to irritate. But when we put ourselves into the presence of God and meditate on God's eternal purposes, every matter is placed into its proper level of importance, and we can be equipped by God to deal appropriately with the manifold affairs of life.

At the same time, when we come into the presence of God, we gain a proper perspective on some of the things that have not been irritating us, but which should be. The hurts of the poor in the world, the ravaging of the environment, the points of weakness or shallowness in our own spiritual life—such areas also become lifted up to their proper level of importance when we turn our thoughts to God. The 19th century theologian Walter

Rauschenbusch put it this way: “In the presence of God, big things become small, and small things become great.”ⁱⁱ

So the Lord’s Prayer leads us to start, not with our concerns and what we may want from God, but simply with God. As the 16th century spiritual leader Johann Arndt put it: “Our highest desire and glory is to be not God’s gifts, but God Himself.”ⁱⁱⁱ This is exactly how Jesus is directing us, when he teaches us at the outset to pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.”

i. Lance Webb, *The Art of Personal Prayer*, p. 10.

ii. from Walter Rauschenbusch, “The Postern Gate.”

iii. Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*.