Book 11

Sunday, February 20, 1983

"THE MODEL PRAYER"

No. 1 in a series on The Lord's Prayer

Luke 11:1-4
Romans 9:35-39

As far as we know, only one thing did the disciples ever ask Jesus specifically to teach them. One day when Jesus had finished praying, as was his custom, one of his disciples, speaking for all of them, said, "Lord, teach us to pray." In answer to this request, Jesus gave the model prayer which we know as "The Lord's Prayer."

In the New Testament, there are several different versions of this prayer, and in church tradition, there are even more. Some people say, "Forgive us our debts"; others say, "Forgive us our trespasses"; and still others say, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." On the insert in your order of service, you'll see several of these versions and translations. For our purposes in this sermon series, we'll be following the version the most familiar to us, the one on the sculpture above, but we'll also look at other variations so as to understand its meaning more fully.

To begin, however, let's look at the meaning of prayer itself. The literal meaning for the word for prayer in Aramaic, the language Jesus probably spoke as he was doing his teaching, is to "set a trap." In the part of the world where Jesus lived, when individuals went hunting, they would get a box, some bait, and a string. They tied the string to the box trap, set up the trap, and then hid behind a rock or some other adequate shelter, still holding the string, and waited patiently for the animal they desired to trap. And when the animal came, they'd pull the string and catch the prey. So prayer, then, literally means to set your mind like a trap and wait patiently to catch the thoughts of God; that is, to trap inner guidance and impulses, to tune oneself so that the thoughts or presence of God can be experienced.

Prayer also means a state of mind where all thoughts are stilled. It is an alert state of total sensitivity and attentiveness, a form of relaxed concentration. Another meaning of the word is to focus, or to tune in, to God's presence and energy.

We live in a world or universe where God's presence is everywhere. We are living in a spiritual universe filled with God. The entire cosmic system is alive and dynamic. God is both within us and around us. We, however, do not always stay in tune to receive the guidance and strength from God which we need. Our minds are filled with other things, such as fear, worry, greed, jealousy, resentment, and guilt. These block our "tuning in" to God. (Static on a radio)

Prayer, then, is a way of consciously and actively "tuning in" to God's guidance and strength. The Lord's Prayer teaches us the good and wholesome attitudes which help us in our "tuning in." The words of the prayer guide our thoughts and our mental attitude. That's what the words of any prayer are to do. The words are more for us than for God.

As you heard me say many times, prayer is not telling God what to do. God doesn't have to be constantly reminded of our needs or the needs of our relatives or friends. That's why Jesus said, "And when you pray, do not repeat your words like the pagans, for they think that because of much talking they will be heard. Do not be like them, for God knows what you need before you ask." So the purpose of prayer is not to change God, but to change us. No prayer can make God more loving than God already is. Rather, prayer helps attune us to the spiritual forces around us and within us.

Jesus' understanding of prayer was one of direct and intimate communion with God, and he understood God as the essence of all life, both visible and invisible, both tangible and intangible.

Jesus taught his disciples a new manner of praying, because he knew some things they didn't know. He knew that we human beings do not have to beg and beseech God to give us good things, as if God would not do so if we didn't ask. Jesus knew that our capacity to receive good is limited only by our failure to accept it and claim it.

Jesus also knew that our spirit and God's Spirit are of the same essence because we are created in God's image, the only difference being that in this world we are finite while God is infinite. But we do have the power to capture God's ideas, God's truth and guidance. It is by tuning into God's Spirit that we learn to create that which is good and worthwhile.

Now let's look more specifically at the Lord's Prayer as the model prayer. We are told that the Lord's Prayer was not totally original with Jesus. A similar prayer was prayed in the synagogues of his time. But Jesus took that prayer and placed a different emphasis on various parts of it. He shifted the emphasis from a human-centered idea to a God-centered prayer. He changed certain words or attitudes, such as praying for the Kingdom of God, instead of praying for the political and nationalistic rule of Israel.

Actually, the Lord's Prayer contains the essence of Jesus' teachings. It is a capsule summary of the message he preached for three years. It is a brief summary of Jesus' beliefs about God, about human beings and the world.

The Lord's Prayer contains seven petitions. The first three are adoration: they concern God's nature, God's Kingdom, God's will; while the next four petitions concern our needs: our daily temporal needs, our need of forgiveness, our defense against the onset of temptation, and our deliverance from evil.

Now let's look at the first phrase of that prayer: "Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name."

The phrase can also be translated, "Our Father, Who is in the universe," or, "Our Father, Who is everywhere," or just simply, "Our universal Father." The reason the word "Father," or it could be "Mother," is so important is that it speaks of the personal nature of God, and it suggests that we as individuals can approach God directly, just as we approach an earthly parent directly. No intermediary is needed.

Prior to this time, when people prayed, they didn't pray just to God. Rather, the one praying would say, "Oh, Father Abraham," "Oh, Father Isaac," "Oh, Father Jacob," as if for their forefather's sake, but not their own, God would possibly hear them and grant their petitions.

But Jesus makes it known through this opening statement that God is like a parent to us, a parent who knows our needs, a parent who is interested in our welfare, and we can have direct communication with this loving parent.

Note also that the pronoun is plural, "Our Father," not "My Father, who art in heaven," or "Your Father." We are all God's children, and God loves and cares for each one of us equally. There is not one child who is the favorite, as can happen in our human families.

God is the creator of all peoples and all races. He is not just my father or your father or their father. None of us owns God. God is not a local or a tribal God. So when we say, "Our Father, Who art in heaven," or, "Our God, Who is universal," we are freeing ourselves from limiting and mistaken concepts of a sectarian, nationalist, partisan God.

Note, too, that the word Father, mother, or parent tells us that God is not some far off, fearsome deity who has nothing to do with creation. Our God is close and approachable.

Think of what it means to your self-esteem, your feeling of self-worth, to be able to say, "God is my parent; I am God's child." This is saying, "I am somebody. I have worth." I once knew a person who had little self-esteem. She came from a family background that she considered as having little worth. She would often say, "If I carried one of the great family names of history and had that identification and connection, "I'd really know I am somebody, and I would have a strong, positive self-image." She forgot that she had the most worthy family name of all: "child of God, a part of the family of God." God is our father and mother.

The pronoun "Our" and the word "Father" tell us that we do not have to approach God as if we were totally degraded, no good, worthless people. This does not mean that we do not make mistakes or that we are perfect. Jesus knew that we are sinners, but he always appealed to the good in people. He provided the means for people to be restored when they strayed.

This first phrase of the Lord's Prayer also shows us that we are never out of communion with God; rather prayer is the acknowledgment of and the very expression of that union. It is because we are God's children that we can communicate with God. At no time can there be separation from God. If we believe that we are cut off or separated from God, then it is we who bring the sense of division. It is not God who does this.

That's why St. Paul wrote to the church at Rome, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So the first idea which the Lord's Prayer gives to us is that we are one with God. It's another way of saying that God is with us in all things, in our joys and in our sorrows. God cannot be confined to any sacred shrine or contained in any one thing. God is universal Spirit, yet God is also personal.

The second phrase of the Lord's Prayer, "Hallowed be Thy Name," is very closely connected to the first. Another way to say it is, "Holy is Your Name," or "Let Your Name be set apart."

Saying this phrase is to remind us that God's Name is to be set apart. In Jesus' time when business people sold articles, they would frequently call upon God's name in their bargaining. They would

raise a hand to the heavens and swear in God's name, taking an oath something like this: "In the name of God and all His holy messengers, this shirt is worth $10.00, but you can have it for only $5.00." Jesus was against such uses of God's name.

The use of God's name in such ways reminds us of the third commandment of the ten: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain," which means we should not use God's name in a false or flippant way. God's name has been attached too often, then and now, in deceptive ways. We human beings have gone to war in God's name, carried on persecutions in God's name, crusades and massacres in God's name.

God is holy and is not to be misused by us for our own small purposes. God takes no part in evil transactions or in deeds which hurt, destroy, or kill people. The phrase, "Hallowed be Thy Name," or "Holy is Your Name," is to remind us of this. God's name represents all that is good, so let us speak God's name in goodness and truth only.

Notice, too, that there is not a single petition in the Lord's Prayer that asks God to make you or me a sanctified person. Jesus turns our attention away from ourselves, even from our pious selves, and concentrates it upon God. So the prayer is not, "May I be hallowed," but "Hallowed be God's Name."

Quite simply, this means that if I want to become a new person, I should not begin with myself, with my good intentions and my moral endeavors; rather, the primary question of my life is whether I am in fellowship with God. If this relationship in my life is right, then my interior life will be right. No one can live inwardly if he or she tries to break away from the source of life. When a person tries to get away from God, it is like becoming someone who is deprived of the sun, and is therefore isolated from the element of life which is a part of our nature.

So Jesus did not teach us to pray, "Make me a consecrated, holy person," but rather to say,

"Hallowed be Thy Name," and by doing this, we are saying, "It doesn't depend at all on our own exertions and our own inner progress." Everything depends on our being willing to honor God and let God work in our lives. Then the other will come of itself.

When we hallow God's name, put God first in our lives, then we are drawn quite spontaneously into a great healing process, and we begin to become new persons.

"Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name." Amen.