Sunday, February 28, 1993
TEACH US TO PRAY (No. 1 in a Series: Lord's Prayer)
Luke 11:1-4; Matthew 6:5-14

As far as we know, the first disciples who followed Jesus asked him to specifically teach them only one thing. One day, when Jesus had finished praying, as was his custom, one of the disciples, speaking for all of them, said, "Lord, teach us to pray." In answer to their request, Jesus gave them a model prayer, which we most frequently call "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 traditions say, "Forgive us our debts," while others say, "Forgive us our trespasses," and still others say, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." For our purposes in this sermon series, we'll be using the version that's on our sculpture, but we'll also be examining other variations to understand the Lord's Prayer as fully as we can.

To begin, however, let's look at the meaning of prayer itself. The literal definition of the word "prayer" in Aramaic, the language which 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 with the bait inside it, and then hid behind a rock or some other adequate hiding place, still holding the string, and waited patiently for the animal they desired to catch. When the animal came into the trap, they'd pull the string and hopefully trap the animal. Prayer then literally means to set your mind like a trap and wait patiently to catch the thoughts or directions from God.

Prayer can also be thought of as a state of mind where all thoughts are stilled. It is an alert state of total sensitivity and attentiveness, a form of relaxed concentration. Prayer is a way of being as open as possible to God's Spirit, presence, and energy.

Our Christian faith teaches us that we live in a world and universe where God's presence is everywhere. In other words, we live in a creation that is filled with God's Spirit. The entire cosmos is alive and dynamic with the loving energy of God. This means that God's spirit and energy are both within us and all around us. We, however, do not always stay in tune so that we are conscious of God's spirit. Think of a radio as an analogy. This room is filled with radio waves that we cannot see. But with the proper receiver, and if it is tuned to the right number on the dial, we can bring the radio waves into our hearing. First, of course, we have to turn the radio on, and then unless we have it tuned properly, we will not receive a clear signal. The signal can also be interrupted with static.

Sometimes prayer is difficult for us because of the static in our lives. Our lives can be filled with other things such as fear, worry, greed, jealousy, resentment, and guilt. These can block our "tuning in" to God. There are times when it takes a lot of tuning to get rid of the static so that we can receive signals from God.

Prayer, then, is a way of intentionally tuning in to God's Spirit, to God's guidance and power. The Lord's Prayer is one way of helping us to get rid of the static and to find the right spot on the dial by guiding our thoughts and our mental attitudes. That's what the words of any prayer are meant to do. The words of prayer are more for helping us than they are for God.

To put it another way, prayer is not telling God what to do. It is not for the purpose of changing God, but for changing us. God doesn't have to be reminded of our needs or the needs of our relatives and 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." No prayer can make God more loving than God already is.

Jesus' experience 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.

He taught his disciples a new manner of praying because he knew some things they didn't yet 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. He knew that our capacity to receive good is limited only by our failure to be open to it, to accept it, and to 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. It also gives us the needed spiritual energy to do things we would not otherwise be able to do.

Now let's look more specifically at the Lord's Prayer as the model prayer. Biblical scholars tell us 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 prayer to a God-centered prayer. He changed certain words or attitudes, such as praying for the Kingdom or reign of God instead of praying for the political and nationalistic rule of Israel.

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 statement of Jesus' beliefs about God, about human beings, and about the world in which we live.

The Lord's Prayer contains seven petitions. The first three are adoration. They identify God's nature, God's Kingdom, and God's will: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The next four petitions are about our needs: our daily bread, our need for forgiveness and to be forgiving, our defense against temptation, and our deliverance from evil.

For the remainder of this first sermon in this series, we are going to examine more carefully the first phrase of the prayer: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name."

The phrase can also be translated, "Our Father, who is in the creation," or "Our Father who is everywhere," or more simply, "Our Universal Father." The reason the metaphor "Father"—or it could be "Mother"—is so important is that it speaks of the personal nature of God, and it suggests that we can approach the Holy Creator God directly, in the same way as we approach an earthly parent directly. No intermediary is needed. If the metaphor "King" or "Queen" had been used to describe God, that suggests that it is more difficult for us to approach God without an intermediary to make an appointment. It wouldn't seem very personal to say, "Our King or Queen who art in heaven."

A whole sermon could be done on metaphors for God, their use, and misuse. The important thing to remember is that's what they are—"metaphors." To pray, "Our Father," does not in any way imply that God is masculine, or "Our Mother" that God is feminine. God is both and more than both. There's nothing wrong with using the metaphors that are most meaningful to you.

Before Jesus gave us this model prayer, when people prayed, they didn't only pray to God. Rather, the one praying might say, "O Father Abraham," or "Father Isaac," or "Mother Sarah," as if for their ancestor's sake God might possibly hear them and grant their petitions. But Jesus makes it known in this opening phrase of his model prayer that God is like a loving parent with 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 together, and God loves and cares for each one of us equally. There is no one child who is the favorite, as can happen in our human families.

God is the creator of all peoples and all races. God is not only my mother or your mother or their mother. None of us owns God. God is not a local or a tribal God or a national God. So when we say, "Our Father who art in heaven," we are freeing ourselves from limiting and mistaken concepts of a sectarian, nationalist, partisan God. Saying, "Our Father," reminds us too that this God who is personal is always revealed through a community of believers. Jesus never separated his personal faith from that of the Hebrew community in which he was raised.

Think of what it means to your self-esteem, your feeling of self-worth, to be able to say, "God is like a parent. I am God's child, and I am also a part of a community of believers."

I have known many individuals who have had low self-esteem. But there is one person I remember in particular. 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 that I am somebody." She spent years searching for someone she considered important in her family tree. She was hoping she would discover that somewhere, generations ago, she was descended from a royal family. 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 mother and father. So it is that the first part of the opening sentence of the Lord's Prayer reminds us that God is universal Spirit, yet God is also personal and revealed through a tradition and a community of believers. You cannot have one without the other.

The second part of the opening 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." "Your name is sacred, which means you are sacred."

Repeating this phrase reminds us that although God is personal, God is also holy and to be held in awe.

In Jesus' time, when businesspeople sold articles, they would frequently call upon God's name in their bargaining. They would raise a hand and swear in God's name, taking an oath something like this: "In the name of God and all God's holy messengers, this shirt is worth $10, but you can have it for only $5." Jesus was against this kind of use of God's name.

The misuse of God's name is prohibited in the 3rd Commandment of the Ten: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." We can so easily trivialize God's name.

Furthermore, God's name has been attached too often, then and now, to deceptive ways. We human beings have gone to war in God's name; carried on persecutions in God's name; and crusades and massacres in God's name.

God is to be hallowed and is not to be misused by us for our own small purposes. God takes no part in evil transactions, in dishonest deals, or in deeds that hurt, destroy, or kill people. Rather, God's name represents all that is good, so let us speak God's name in goodness and truth only.

Notice too, there is not a single petition in the Lord's Prayer that asks God to make you or me a sanctified person. In the prayer, 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 do not begin with myself, with my good intentions and my moral endeavors; rather, the primary question of my life is whether in what I am doing, I am glorifying God and hallowing God's name. If my relationship with God is on the right track, then my life will also be on the right track. You cannot live a holy and fulfilling and joyful life if you break away from the source of life.

Jesus did not teach us to pray, "Make me a consecrated, holy person," but rather to pray, "Hallowed be Thy Name," and by doing this, we are saying, "It does not depend at all on our own exertions and our own inner progress." Everything depends on our being willing to honor and glorify God and thereby allow God to work in our lives.

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.