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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
7/24/2016, The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost,
Genesis 18:20-32, Luke 11:1-13, Lectionary 17
Our Lord's Prayer

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon this morning is on the Lord's Prayer. In our Gospel Lesson, one of the twelve disciples asks Jesus to teach them how to pray. I am quite sure they *already* know how to pray. After all, they are Jews, with a long and wonderful tradition of prayer behind them. They have the Psalms, for example, and other beautiful models of prayer in the Old Testament. I am thinking especially now of this morning's moving example of intercessory prayer as Abraham prayed for the town of Sodom. So I bet the disciples knew about prayer from their mother's knee.

But in this morning's Gospel Lesson, the disciple who asks Jesus for instruction in prayer seems to be asking for a special prayer – a prayer reflective of Jesus and of all Jesus means to them. He says, "Lord, teach us to pray, *as John taught his disciples.*" Phrasing things this way suggests that the disciples of Jesus seek something personal from him – something that is suited for those who have left their fishing nets and their tax offices and so forth and have come forth and followed Jesus. John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray; now the disciples of Jesus seek instruction from *their* Master about how to pray.

Perhaps they have noticed Jesus at prayer. He has left them, from time to time, for the sake of prayer. For example, in Luke 6, we read this passage:

And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.
(Luke 6:12, KJV)

Some men might ask for wealth from another man. But there is no point in asking for wealth from Jesus, for he is a poor man with nowhere to lay his head. Some men might ask for a letter of recommendation from another man. But again, there is no point in seeking a recommendation from Jesus, for how valuable can a letter be from someone who is scorned and rejected and finally killed on a cross? Some men might be glad to have a personal item from another man – a letter or a fountain pen or something. This man – this disciple – simply asks Jesus to teach him and the other disciples about prayer. It was a wise request, I do believe.

So, this morning I want to talk about the Lord's Prayer. It is familiar to you, I am sure. It is so familiar that I often fall asleep at night reciting that prayer. Its rhythms, its words are so familiar that I can repeat the words without even thinking about them very much. But this time, let's think about them! Let's cherish the prayer our Lord taught us, as if seeing with fresh eyes someone who captured our heart long ago.

To explore our Lord's Prayer, I plan to lift up some themes from a clergy presentation led by Rev. Dr. Thomas Nelson Green last year. You remember Fr. Green, I suspect. He was interim pastor here at Immanuel long ago, from 1968-70. In recent years he has been our Good Friday preacher. So, I wish to share some of Fr. Green's themes with you about the Our Father.

But before getting to that, I want to begin by noting simply how wonderful the beginning of the prayer is. You might have heard that it was innovative of Jesus to refer to the holy God of Israel as "Father." There is a sense of intimacy in this address. In Israel's scriptures, her God is referred to with majestic titles: O holy God, Maker of heaven and earth, Almighty God, Most High God, and so forth. Compared to these titles, the word "Father" is more friendly. And it is a tremendous thought to speak of "Father." When we think of heaven above, our first thought should be of Father, not of Judge.

So I agree that there is something remarkable about Jesus beginning the prayer by speaking of Father. But also I want to lift up that little word "our." "*Our* Father" who art in heaven. Perhaps this is the kindest, most gentle and encouraging thing Jesus can say to us. That phrase "our Father" elevates us far beyond our deserving. For technically speaking, most holy God, the Maker of heaven and earth, is not *our* Father. He is simply the Father of Jesus. When the heavens broke open and the Spirit descended in the form of a dove, the holy voice said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17, KJV). The voice was referring to Jesus, not to you and me. And on the holy mountain, when again the divine voice spoke, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Matthew 17:5, RSV), the voice was referring to Jesus, not to you and me.

And yet in the prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to refer to *his* Father in heaven as *Our* Father in heaven. Wonderful confusion! It is as if Jesus is saying to God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, "You have some new children! They are my brothers and sisters. I count them so. And I have asked them to address you as Father." In this way, Jesus befriends all those who belong to him. He befriends *us* and introduces us to the Father as children of the heavenly Father. That is something to think about. We might not have royal ancestors or anyone famous at all related to us, and yet in the prayer our Lord taught us, we find ourselves related most closely to God above. Wonderful thought!

Alright, to the presentation by Rev. Green. His presentation was based on a book by a German theologian named Friedrich Rittelmeyer.¹ Father Green lifted up for us various passages from Rittelmeyer's book. I want especially to share four of those passages with you.

The first passage continues my sense of wonder at the word "Father." Rittelmeyer puts the point this way:

¹ "Das Vaterunser" by Friedrich Rittelmeyer (1872-1938).

When we awake in the morning we see beyond the dead
riddle of the world and say Father.

That is, this prayer points us toward God. It does not point us toward a dead, meaningless reality. Perhaps this is the greatest gift the church can give the world these days. Despair threatens our land, our people. Murder, mayhem, and suicide all reflect the deep-down sense that life is meaningless, that there is nothing beyond these threescore and ten years, that there is no eternity, no ultimate hope, and no ultimate accountability. The proud theories of bygone intellectuals have become the stock-in-trade of every schoolboy: "There is no God, there is no real meaning to life except what we happen to choose. The only final good is some good state of myself, so watch out! Don't get in my way!"

But the prayer our Lord taught us invites us to wake up in the morning and to go out into life as brothers and sisters of Jesus – as people deeply oriented toward God, believing in him, hoping in him, trying to live life well for him. We walk through the day alongside Jesus, remembering heaven, remembering eternity, and thinking that a good life is worthwhile.

The second theme concerns the will of God – the petition that says "Thy will be done." Father Green lifted up this passage:

Christ Himself speaks of the will of God when He says, "I have completed the work that you have given me to do." We also have a life's work, given to us, that we are to do. A divine will hovers over our entire life...A piece of God's will hovers over every hour of our life...As often as we do the will of God we weave a piece of heaven into the earth.

That is quite an image there – the image of the weaver. I have looked on with fascination as my wife, Carol, has woven in various colors of yarn into her knitting. Something that beforehand was nice, but dull, suddenly becomes radiant and delightful. So it is with this prayer. When we pray "Thy will be done," we are also praying that we might lend some radiance to this world. We pray that our attempts to do God's will in our life will bring some beauty to the patchwork of reality for our neighbors in this world.

The third passage is about "our daily bread." Fr. Green lifted up this wonderful passage:

...we pray in the plural not the singular. If a person prays this petition in the spirit of Christ, he is daily touched by the presence of the hungry brothers. When a hungry brother knocks at our door, behind him the Father says, "Behold, I now fulfill your petition. I place in your hands the ability to fulfill your petition."

This sense of the plural is important. When we pray for daily bread, it is not just for ourselves that we pray. We pray for “us” – plural. “Give *us* this day our daily bread.” That is why churches and Christians are charitable. We do not want our brother or sister to go hungry or naked or homeless or hopeless. Rittelmeyer, then, makes this surprising turn: he points out that when a hungry brother or sister stands at the door, the Father is placing in our hands “the ability to fulfill your petition.” We have prayed that *we* will not go hungry – not just ourselves individually, but *us*. Give *us* this day our daily bread. So when the hungry brother or sister stands before us, we are thereby given a chance to fulfill our petition that *we* should not go hungry.

And the last passage of which I wish to speak concerns the doxology at the end of the prayer: “for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.” Fr. Green says this:

Rittelmeyer imagines the prayer of the Christians coming from the catacombs. Outside are the legions and the might of the Roman Empire. From the catacombs come the words, “Thine is the kingdom.”

Outside, the Roman Emperor has power to command a powerless people. The earth is obedient to his commands. From the catacombs come, “Thine is the power.”

The grandeur of everything pertaining to the imperial reign is legendary. From the catacombs, “Thine is the glory.”

In this way, our Lord’s Prayer is defiant – but defiant in a way that gives hope to the world. For in the end, it does no good to image that kingdom and power and glory reach only so high as us fallible human beings. It is good to have hope for these things that goes beyond flawed humanity and rests in holy God, our Father in heaven.

Martin Luther once referred to the Lord’s Prayer as “the greatest martyr on earth.” It is an interesting passage. Let me read it for you:

What a great pity that the prayer of such a master is prattled and chattered so irreverently all over the world! How many pray the Lord’s Prayer several thousand times in the course of a year, and if they were to keep on doing so for a thousand years they would not have tasted nor prayed one iota, one dot, of it! In a word, the Lord’s Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth... (Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, 1535)

Well, my theory is that even if we should pray the Lord’s Prayer in a routine, habitual way, pray on! It is a good routine. It is a holy habit. Beginning the day

and ending the day with the Lord's Prayer is a good way to frame the day, even if we are guilty, as Luther says, of failing to taste "one iota, one dot, of it!" Our God hears. But if we *would* linger with the prayer, we will find it to be a rich, comforting, and bracing prayer. It is a great gift to us from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.