Questions: Why Do We Pray the Lord's Prayer?
Questions Sermon Series 3
February 19, 2017
Trinity Bixby
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I Chronicles 19: 10-20
Luke 11:1-4
Matthew 6:5-15

There were once two kids in church, who were, as we all are wont to do, whispering to each other during the Sunday service. "I bet you don't know God's name!" said little Aaron. "Do so!" replied Kari, "We say it EVERY day."

"Nuh-uh! We don't say it every Sunday at all. Obviously, God's name is Andy, just like my cousin."

"Uh, Aaron, your cousin Andy isn't God. I've seen 'em drink milk straight from the carton, and I'm pretty sure God wouldn't do things like that."

"Geez, Kari – I'm not saying my cousin is God. But it's like that song we sang at Nana's church – 'Andy walks with me, Andy talks with me, Andy tells me I am his own."

"No way is God's name Andy. That's short for something, like Andrew or Andrea. God's name is much more dignified."

"Oh yeah? You can't possibly know a better name for God than Andy."

"Aaron, of course I do. It's Howard!"

"Howard? Why would it be Howard? That's silly!"

"Of course it's Howard! Every day, when we say our prayers, I say 'Our Father, who art in Heaven, Howard be thy name.'"

And with that, welcome to week three of the Questions sermon series, where Pastor Elana and I discuss questions you've raised. I know there's only one week of this sermon series left, but if you've got a question we haven't

tackled yet, don't worry! We plan to do this again in a few months – so, feel free to send us questions when you think of them. Even if we can't sermonize about it, we'd be happy to chat with you! This week, you've probably figured out, we're going to talk about the model prayer, the prayer that Jesus taught, the pater noster, otherwise known as – the Lord's Prayer. Where does it come from? Why do we pray it? Why is the Presbyterian way to say "Debts and Debtors," but our Methodist cousins say "trespasses" or "those who sinned against us?" And why do Catholic visitors stop before the last line – or, looked at another way, why do Protestants out themselves at Catholic weddings when they keep going?

Let's start with its origins. There are two versions of the prayer in Scripture – the Lukan and the Matthean. Most of our liturgical variants are taken from the version in Matthew 6, which is a bit longer than the version in Luke. Matthew also makes the prayer corporate – saying "Our Father" rather than just "Father," the way Luke does. In other words, Matthew's version reminds us that God is more than just Jesus' father – and more than just *my* father, too. Also, in Luke, the disciples ask Jesus for an example prayer while they're alone with Jesus – in Matthew, it comes as part of a longer public sermon – the Sermon on the Mount, to be precise. There's one other major difference, but we'll get to that in a moment.

"Our Father, who art in heaven…" What is Jesus teaching us with this beginning? First, God is our father, but God is also our father in heaven. What does this mean for us? It means that we're something of free-range kids, never out of God's watchful eye, equal with each other, but not with God. God lets us stumble, get hurt, and learn from each other, while pouring out love for us, and keeping us ultimately safe! Now, a note: you may have heard some people say that Jesus' use of "father" for God is unusual – some even say unique. This is just poor scholarship – many, many prayers of the first centuries BCE and CE address God as Father, including many pagan prayers directed to the Roman Emperor! Indeed, Jesus may be using familiar prayer language to make a point – that our prayers ought to be directed to Our Father in Heaven, rather than anyone on earth who claims the title of Our Father.

Now, the next line of the prayer, “Hallowed be thy name.” In contemporary English, this would be “May your name be kept holy.” Ok, so you might say, “Fair enough. Keep holy the name of God. Great, let’s move on.” Ah! But you’re missing an important piece here. Most of us hear this line and think it means, “Don’t swear in God’s name.” It does – but a person’s name meant more in the ancient world than just what to call out in the vocative case to get their attention! A name was thought to contain the essence of your being – the character, the personality of the person whose name it was. When we pray this line of the prayer, we are asking God to help us keep God’s nature and character, God’s very essence, holy and revered.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Now, we’re getting into the very heart of the prayer! We are asking God to bring heaven to earth, to establish the kingdom of heaven in the here-and-now. Once again, Jesus is getting a bit political. He’s saying to pray for God’s kingdom – not Caesar’s kingdom. It’s phrased in the poetry of the Hebrew Bible, where one line complements and expands upon the next – so “Thy kingdom come” is equivalent to “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Can you imagine how amazing this would be, to have God’s will done? After all, God’s will is for us to love each other, to live truly as God’s beloved family in the world. It gives me chills thinking about this!

“Give us this day our daily bread.” How often do we say this phrase and not stop to think about what it means? Isn’t it redundant? “Give us today our bread for today” is one way to translate the Greek. But there’s a big debate over the exact meaning of the Greek word that’s usually translated “daily.” It doesn’t appear in any other texts of the day, so we can’t compare it, and the early theologian named Origen wrote that it appeared the Gospel writers invented the word. Jewish New Testament scholar AJ Levine describes the phrase this way: “[Its] definitions range from ‘necessary for existence’ to ‘for the current day’ to ‘for the following day’ to ‘be coming’. Perhaps the best translation, then, would be, ‘Give us tomorrow’s bread today,’ for that makes the most sense in a first-century Jewish setting. Jewish texts speak of the *olam ha-bah*, the world to come, as a

glorious banquet…. 'Give us tomorrow's bread today' therefore means 'bring about your rule, when we can eat at the messianic banquet.' This is the prophetic hope, the prophetic vision." I like her vision, of "tomorrow's bread today" - continuing the thought of the previous lines of the prayer, but it's certainly not the only way to read it.

Another possibility lies in a historical reality in Rome: the bread ration. In Jesus' day, every free person in the city of Rome was eligible for a daily ration of bread, whether they were the wealthiest Patrician or the lowest Plebian. This was ridiculously expensive, but had been established by the Senate at the behest of several tribunes, who argued that the laws that the Senate passed that favored the Patricians and Equites – the top two classes in Roman society – had caused the free laborers to lose their farms and move to the city, looking for work as Plebians. Therefore, the city owed them the basic ability to live. A few hundred years later, after Constantine's institution of the state church, it became the job of the church to supply this bread ration, which the churches gladly did, standing in for God to provide daily bread. It is possible that Jesus had this in mind – asking God to provide daily bread not just in Rome but for everyone who calls on God's name.

"And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Here, we come to an interesting quirk of translation and history, rolled into one. First, though – do you know why we pray this particular prayer using archaic English? You certainly know that Jesus didn't speak English – much less archaic English – so why is there so much agreement across the English-speaking world about how this prayer is translated? Really, if you stop and think about it, it's quite weird how we can all pray this prayer in sync with each other at all. And you're absolutely correct – it can be traced back to the beginnings of Protestant faith in England. In 1549, the Archbishop of Canterbury – the head of the Church of England – issued the Book of Common Prayer, which included instructions for priests throughout England in how to conduct a service in English, as well as prayers and liturgies for many occasions. Everyone in the Anglican church was supposed to use the same translation, which was based on William Tyndale's

1526 translation of the Bible. After the release of the 1611 Authorized Version of the Bible – which we call the King James Version today – the Book of Common Prayer was updated to add the new translation.

Most of the Lord's Prayer was the same, but where Tyndale had translated "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," the King James Version had "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Many in the Anglican church preferred their traditional reading, while the Scottish Presbyterians preferred the newer translation, and so in the Presbyterian Book of Common Prayer, the King James version was used. (I'm skipping a lot of history here – it's a lot more complicated than this). At the center of the matter is that the Greek in Matthew is best translated debts and debtors – *Opheilema*. It means, *a failure to pay that which is due*. Luke, on the other hand, uses both *Opheilema* and *Hamartia*, the Greek word that usually gets translated as sin. So, in the Lukan version, the Lord's Prayer reads "forgive us our sin as we forgive our debtors." This is where the sin/sinned against us version gets its root, though no denomination (to my knowledge) uses two different words in this portion of the prayer.

So that's the different wording, but what does it mean? It's a radical statement, asking God to forgive our debt exactly as we forgive the debt that others owe us. Scottish theologian William Barclay puts it like this: "Of all the petitions in the Lord's Prayer, this is the most frightening…. Jesus says in the plainest possible language that if we forgive others, God will forgive us, but if we refuse to forgive others, God will refuse to forgive us. It is therefore quite clear that if we pray this petition with an unhealed breach, an unsettled quarrel in our lives, we are asking God *not* to forgive us." Yikes! And on top of that, AJ Levine reminds us that Jesus uses the word debt deliberately: "It goes directly to the pocketbook;" she writes, "It says, 'Don't hold a debt. If someone needs, you give.' The call is for economic justice." We're going to need to forgive debts, then – both where we've wronged each other, and where we hold a financial motive. I don't know about you, but I think that's a tough thing to achieve! That doesn't make it any less important, though.

Ok, folks, we're into the home stretch now! "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from Evil." It may not seem like it, but this is another poetic parallelism - "Don't test us, and especially don't let us face Evil." Testing in the Bible is usually incredibly difficult – see Abraham and Isaac, the afflictions of Job, Jesus in the wilderness, and so on. Asking God not to test or tempt us is an admission of weakness – that we fear giving in to the evil that can seem to fill the world. The Greek word that's translated "lead us" literally means "place in the middle of" – it's like we're saying, "don't just plunk us down in the hands of Evil." Instead, we want God to keep us safely in God's midst.

And that's where the prayer ends in the Bible. Yet, we protestants have this ending: "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever." This was added by the early church – so early that one of the first guidebooks to being Christian, called the *Didache*, includes it. Many monks, familiar with how the prayer was read, included it in the copies of the Bible, even though it wasn't originally in the text. When Tyndale wrote his English translation, he was working from copies that had the last line in them, so he included it. Later scholarship revealed that it wasn't original, and most modern translations don't include it, or include it only with a footnote. Great – but where did it come from? Surprisingly, it looks like it was based on David's prayer at the dedication of the Temple, found in first Chronicles! "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory and the majesty. Everything in the heavens and on earth is yours, O Lord, and this is your kingdom." The Catholic Church, though it once used the same ending phrase, actually decided to drop this phrase from the public liturgy, which is why they seem to stop early.

So, why do we keep saying the prayer in archaic English, using an ancient form that wasn't in the original text? I'd like to say it has to do with the power of the familiar to bring comfort. Anymore, it's hard to find any piece of liturgy or prayer that's shared across all English-speaking Christians. We aren't restricted to prayers from the Book of Common Prayer – which is a good thing, as it frees us to creatively worship God! But this prayer is held in common, in words that are special, that are memorized across the faith. Henri Nouwen reminds us that

when we pray a familiar prayer with great attention, we experience healing. "[As you pray] you will be constantly distracted by your worries, but if you keep going back to the words of the prayer, you will gradually discover that your worries become less obsessive and that you really start to enjoy praying. And as the prayer descends from your mind into the center of your being you will discover its healing power."

Now, may God's will be done in you. May Jesus' love be shown in you. And may the Spirit bring you tomorrow's bread today, that we may live truly as sisters and brothers in God's kingdom. Amen.