

Rev. David Strain
July 19, 2009 – AM

The Lord's Prayer: "Our Father Who Art in Heaven"
Matthew 6:1-15

Is prayer more like breathing or riding a bike?

You had to be taught how to ride your bike as a child. But no one needed to teach you how to breathe.

Which, I wonder, would you liken prayer to most readily? Is it an instinctive and constant reality, like drawing breath, or is it a wobbly precarious exercise like learning to ride a bicycle for the very first time?

There is a sense in which we would be right if we said that prayer for a Christian is most like breathing. James Montgomery was not wrong when he makes us sing, "Prayer is the Christian's vital breath, The Christian's native air." There has never been a real Christian who does not instinctively cry to God from the heart.

That is why some of us find it a surprise to meet Jesus' disciples asking Him to *teach* them how to pray, as John taught His disciples, in Luke 11:1. Surely Christians don't need to be taught to pray? It ought to be the most natural thing in the world.

But then there are others of us here, who do pray, but who find the disciples expressing something they feel the urgent need of. They want help in prayer. They have never found private prayer easy. They don't find the words coming as they think they ought. Some of us feel as if prayer is much more like riding a bike than catching a breath. And we've fallen off enough times to know we need some help.

Well, over the next ten weeks or so, we are going to join Jesus in the school of prayer as we work our way through the prayer that He gave us, commonly called the Lord's Prayer.

He gave this prayer in two forms on two different occasions. The first was in Matthew 6:9 where Jesus responds to the failures of the hypocritical Pharisees at prayer by providing a more adequate pattern for our prayers so that we might have guidance on what we ought to pray. So, he prefaced the Matthew version with, "In this manner, therefore, pray" Here is a model and a template; a suggested list of topics and an outline to follow.

In Luke 11, however, Jesus is alone with His disciples who are upset at their lack of instruction in prayer. They felt adrift and in need of direction, and so Jesus, building on His earlier teaching, used the pattern He had already given them as the more general outline for prayer and taught them to use it as an actual prayer itself. Luke 11:2 “When you pray, say...”

So the Lord’s Prayer is Jesus’ own instruction manual on prayer. But it is more than that. It is also a rich deposit of Biblical truth. Each line stands, iceberg like, at the summit of a huge mountain Biblical teaching so that the tip of the iceberg that we see rests on much, much more just below the surface. We are all more or less familiar with this prayer.

If you’ve been with us at Main Street before, you will in all likelihood have joined in with us, or at least listened, as we’ve recited this prayer together. Many of us have taught our children this prayer as we were taught it ourselves as children.

But how many of us are familiar with the riches that it contains? We may know its lines well, but do we know their meaning? Do we appreciate its message as well as its form?

Well, exploring the message of this prayer is our task over the next several weeks. And this morning I want to begin with the opening address, “Our Father in heaven.”

And the first thing we learn here is that *this is a corporate prayer.*

It begins “*our* Father.”

Some years ago I was at a gathering of ministers in London when the now standard biography of Jonathan Edwards written by George Marsden had just been published. One of the men was reflecting on what he felt was a weakness of Edwards that came out in the biography. Edwards was prone, he said, to a “me, Jesus, and my Bible” spirituality.

Now that kind of Christian piety has come to dominate in our culture. We are instinctively individualistic to the very core. We struggle to think in corporate categories. We locate the vital living core of our Christianity in our private spiritual exercises. If we are asked about the welfare of our souls, we tend to reply with a highly subjective self evaluation based on how we feel. Church, if we think of it, is a bolt on, a helpful additional resource to bring me closer to Jesus at a personal level.

And of course, the scriptures are emphatic in their unqualified insistence on personal spiritual reality. Nothing can substitute for an authentic communion and fellowship between the individual believing heart and Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the prevailing mode of living out our Christian lives thinks first about my private duties and disciplines and may eventually get to Sunday worship and the life of the local church as of secondary importance.

But the Lord's Prayer is couched in language that runs in exactly the opposite direction. It thinks of Christian devotion in primarily corporate, family terms. Throughout the prayer, whenever it is not addressing God, it speaks of human need in the plural. *Our* Father, give *us our* daily bread, forgive *us our* sin as we forgive *our* debtors, lead *us*, deliver *us*. It has in mind the gathered community of believers in Jesus, living and growing and worshipping and praying together.

This was something Jesus Himself modeled. We often find Him taking groups of disciples aside to pray. Luke 9:28 says that He took Peter and John for that purpose. In Luke 11, we learn that it was listening to Jesus pray that prompted the disciples to ask for guidance for themselves, "Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when He finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught His disciples." Matthew 26:37 tells us that in the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus faced the agonies of His coming crucifixion, He withdrew to pray, bringing Peter, James, and John with Him.

Jesus was often alone in prayer, but He modeled to His disciples a collective dynamic in His own spiritual life that He expected them to imitate when He taught them to pray, *our* Father. The Shorter Catechism Q&A 100 explains that the preface to the Lord's Prayer teaches us to "pray with and for others."

One of the reasons why we have a men's prayer breakfast on the last Saturday morning of each month and why we gather during the winter months every Wednesday evening for corporate congregational prayer is because Jesus himself taught us that prayer is a corporate activity. I do want to encourage you to join us and to make those prayer meetings a priority. There may be other things you enjoy more. There will be other things that demand your time. But let me encourage you, in view of the corporate dimension that Jesus both teaches and modeled here, to make corporate congregational prayer a priority.

The Lord's Prayer reminds us that Christians are connected not only vertically to God, but horizontally to one another. It teaches us to look at the church differently. It is not a gathering of individuals seeking personal encouragement and spiritual growth. It is a body deeply connected in all its part. It is an integrated whole and each member belongs to all the others.

To pray *our* Father is to confess your commitment to the local church. You are saying you belong and these people, warts and all, are *your* people and you are theirs. But I wonder if we really grasp the implications of that for our Christian lives in our consumer driven society?

We are being called to stop drifting in and out as if the church were a provider of goods and services which, when it becomes inconvenient or you get a better offer, is soon abandoned. We are being called, instead, to intimate uncomfortable lasting union with each other, and we are confessing that it is precisely within that context that we are resolved to live out our Christian lives whenever we pray "Our father"

Then secondly, we learn that this is *a Godward prayer.*

It is a remarkable feature of this prayer that at no point do we find "I," "me," "my," or "mine" being used. We might say that this prayer has a *location*. That location is the *corporate* life of the local church. We are to pray in plurals. But if the *location* of the Lord's Prayer is important, still more important is the *direction* of the Lord's Prayer. *Who* is being addressed is even more significant than who is doing the addressing!

We are to pray to our *Father*.

There are exactly 14 references to God's Fatherhood in the Old Testament scriptures. They all make reference to God acting as Father to Israel corporately. There is not one single explicit reference to the Fatherhood of God for individuals in the whole Hebrew Bible. The closest we get is the passage we read together a moment ago from Isaiah 63:16, "Doubtless You are our Father, though Abraham was ignorant of us, and Israel does not acknowledge us. You, O LORD, are our Father; our redeemer from Everlasting is Your name." But even there, as beautiful as it is, Isaiah is dealing with God's Fatherhood of the remnant, the corporate people of God.

Now there is some evidence that around the time of Jesus some Jews were beginning to address God as Father. Shortly after Jesus' time, synagogues began using a prayer called the 18 Benedictions, two of which addressed God as Father. Nevertheless, there is something unique about Jesus' use of "Father" in addressing God.

Whereas, among the Jews of His day, calling God "Father" was rare in the extreme, it was *Jesus'* normal mode of address. Wherever we have record of His prayers, we find them beginning with an address to "Abba, Father." To Jewish ears to claim to be the Son of God and have God for your Father entailed a claim to sharing the same nature as God Himself. So for example, when in John 10:30 Jesus said, "I and the Father are one," the Jews picked up stones to stone Him. Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?" The Jews answered Him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone You but for blasphemy, because You, being a man, make Yourself God."

That was the Jewish perspective. Every time Jesus prayed "Father" he was making an implicit claim to deity. The uniqueness of Jesus' address to God means that when we pray "our Father" we pray to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our prayer has a richly Trinitarian context.

We are expressing an awesome reality. Maybe the Lord's Prayer has become so familiar to you, it has been fingered so many times, that it has become tarnished, like finger prints on silverware. It's been handled so often that its shine has been dulled and its beauty hidden. But when we realize the rich Trinitarianism of this prayer, we begin to polish off the accumulated tarnish of frequent use and rediscover its glory. When you begin to see that praying "our Father" speaks as much about the relationship between Jesus and the Father within the Godhead as it does about God's relationship with us, you see something of the majesty of this prayer in particular and all prayer in general.

It is common in some circles to assert that when Jesus taught His disciples to pray "Our Father," He was teaching them to address God as "Daddy." But when He said, "...pray, 'Our Father in heaven'", He was not encouraging a kind of fearless familiarity with God that speaks the name Father without awe.

No, He was doing something extraordinary. He was opening the door of access for His disciples to share in the communion He enjoys with the Eternal Father in the

fellowship of the Blessed Trinity. If that does not blow your mind and make your knees shake with awe as you come to prayer, nothing can.

And in the light of that, how much more highly ought we to prize the gift of prayer than we do? What a privilege Jesus has given to us that we should draw near to God with the same language on our lips that expressed the union and communion of the Son with the Father!

But how is that even possible? How is it not the most astonishing presumption for sinful men and women to call the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ “*our* Father”?

Of course, we never address God as Father with the same depth of meaning carried by our Lord when He cried to Abba Father. Christ stands in a unique relation to the Father. As we saw a moment ago in John 10:30, Jesus and the Father are one. None of us can say that.

So Jesus prayed to God the Father as His only begotten Son. When *we* pray to God *the* Father as God *our* Father, we are praying as *adopted children*. Our prayer expresses our status as adopted sons and daughters.

The apostle Paul explains how our adoption comes about in Galatians 4:4-5, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, *so that we might receive adoption as sons*.”

Because of the obedient life and death of Jesus Christ, we are redeemed from the curse of the law and adopted as the children of God. Our adoption was bought at the cost of the life of the only begotten Son of God. When we pray “Our Father,” we pay within sight of Calvary. The Lord’s Prayer is a bloody prayer. Nails in the hands and feet of the Son of God were the price paid that we might pray the Lord’s Prayer.

It is the prayer of a child of God. It is a gospel prayer. It is the declaration of a sinner who has come to cling to Jesus Christ and Him crucified and has found in Him that Christ’s Father embraces them as their Father.

Until you can say that the cross of Jesus Christ has washed your sin away, atoned for you before the judgment seat, until you can lay claim to the redemption Jesus won for sinners, you cannot pray the Lord’s Prayer. You may mouth the words, but you cannot

enter into the reality. God is not yet your Father until you trust His Son Jesus Christ. It is as we receive and rest upon Him alone as He is offered to us in the gospel that we are adopted into the family of God.

Let me speak here especially to the children in our church. When you say the Lord's Prayer perhaps at home in family devotions or with us all in church and you begin "Our Father," remember that only by trusting in Jesus Christ to save you can you address God this way. If you are a baptized child of the covenant, if you've been raised in the church, you may know much *about* God. But you do not *know* Him till you come to rest on Jesus for yourself. There is no other way to have God as *your* Father without taking *Jesus* for your savior. God has no grandchildren. He is either your father or He is not. Christ is either your savior or he is not. The Lord's Prayer calls you, and it calls us all to come to Christ and to trust Him alone for salvation.

So, this is a corporate prayer and a God-ward prayer. It is also a *reverent* prayer.

We pray to our Father in heaven. Here is a wonderful balance between intimacy and awe, familiarity and fear, trust and trembling. By encouraging us to pray to God the Father as God *our* Father, Jesus promotes a wonderful intimacy. By reminding us that our Father is in heaven, He promotes a reverent wonder and holy awe.

The Larger Catechism's unparalleled exposition of the Lord's Prayer captures that balance well when it says, "The preface to the Lord's Prayer teacheth us, when we pray, to draw near to God with confidence of His fatherly goodness, and our interest therein; with reverence, and all other childlike dispositions, heavenly affections, and due apprehensions of His sovereign power, majesty, and gracious condescension: as also, to pray with and for others."

Did you catch the balance there between intimacy and reverence? We are to draw near to God with confidence of His fatherly goodness on the one hand. There is intimacy. Having God as our Father means that we have confidence to approach the throne of grace. It means that we are able to go to God with a childlike freedom.

We have not received a spirit of bondage again to fear, but we have the Spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry "Abba Father," as Paul says in Romans 8:15. God grants to us His Spirit as His adopted children and by His assuring and comforting work enables us to go to God without servile, guilty fear and speak to Him in the family language of Jesus Himself and call Him Abba Father.

In light of the intimate access Jesus has given us, we need to hear again the exhortation of Hebrews 10:19-23. “Since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is His flesh, and having a High Priest over the House of God, let us draw near to God with a true heart and full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.” Hebrews is calling us in light of the great freedom we have been given at the cost of the torn flesh of Jesus Christ crucified to **boldness** in going to God and **diligence** in doing so. Let us draw near. Let hold fast. Jesus died to give you confidence to do it.

But then there is also reverence. God is our Father in heaven. We may go to Him with confidence as children to their Father, but we must always do so with reverent awe, for our Father is not like earthly fathers. Our Father is transcendent and glorious. Our Father reigns over all things from heaven. Our Father is the Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty. The Catechism calls us to “with **reverence**, and all other childlike dispositions, heavenly affections, and **due apprehensions of His sovereign power, majesty, and gracious condescension.**” There is the note of reverent fear.

The transcendence of God is not hindrance to prayer but a great motive to prayer. If we know that the transcendent Lord is our Father, we will go gladly with boldness to Him when He calls. If we know that our Father is the transcendent Lord, we will fear to stay away from Him when He calls.

We have beautiful encouragements to run to God because of His tenderness to us as a Father. And we have solemn injunctions that binds us to come to God because of His majesty.

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire.”

A corporate prayer, a Godward prayer, and a balanced prayer with both intimacy and reverence.

Amen.