



September 18, 2016
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Lord, Teach Us to Pray: Our Father Who Art in Heaven
Matthew 3:13-17; 6:5-13

We have embarked on a year-long journey of prayer. With the disciples, we cry out, "Lord, teach us to pray!" That is the longing of my heart as your pastor and brother. I hope it is yours, too. And I warn you, the Devil doesn't want us to pray. I was reminded of that this week. Our newspaper tube is .6 miles away from our new apartment. This summer, I started a habit. First thing in the morning, I walk to get the paper and on the way, I memorize a passage of scripture. Then, on the way back, I meditate on that passage and pray about the things God is teaching me. It is powerful, putting God's word in your heart and then praying his own words back to him! Try it!

So what do you think happened this week after I launched this series on prayer? I got too busy for my prayer walks! I had three funerals this weekend plus a sermon, and I got desperate. I needed time to write! And then I caught myself. The Devil would love nothing more than to get me so busy doing religious stuff that I stop praying. So I fought back. I took my prayer walk even though I had all these things hanging over me. And I was astounded at how productive I was. My 20-minute walk with God provided an order and peace to a week that otherwise felt overwhelming!

So, fair warning, the Devil doesn't want you to pray. He is a real enemy. He will try to make you too busy or too tired or too bored or too cynical or too something... So fight back! Don't let him win! Revival awaits us if we, as a church, will pray! So did you? How many of you made one positive step forward in prayer this week?

For ten weeks, we are going to study the Lord's Prayer in Matthew. To set the context, I want to read this version of that moment in the Sermon on the Mount—*The Jesus Storybook Bible*. Listen:

In those days, there were some Extra-Super-Holy People (at least that's what they thought), and they were called "Pharisees." Every day, they would stand out there in the middle of the street and pray out loud in big Extra-Super-Holy voices. They really weren't praying so much as just showing off. They used lots of special words that were so clever, no one understood what they meant.

People walking by would stop and stare, which might sound rude—except that's exactly what the Extra-Super-Holy People wanted. They wanted

everyone to say, "Look at them. They're so holy. God must love those people best."

Now, you and I both know they were wrong—God doesn't just love holy people. But the people walking by weren't so sure. Perhaps you did have to be really clever, or good, or important for God to love you. Perhaps you had to know lots of difficult, clever words to speak to God.

So one day, Jesus taught people how to pray. He said, "When you pray, don't pray like those Extra-Super-Holy People. They think if they say lots of words, God will hear them. But it's not because you're so clever or good, or so important, that God will listen to you. God listens to you because he loves you.

"Did you know that God is always listening to you? Did you know that God can hear the quietest whisper deep inside your heart, even before you've started to say it? Because God knows exactly what you need even before you ask him," Jesus told them.

"You see; God just can't wait to give you all that you need. So you don't need to use long words or special words. You don't have to use a special voice. You just have to talk. "So when you pray, pray in your normal voice, just like when you're talking to someone you love very much. Like this...

Hello Daddy! We want to know you. And be close to you. Please show us how. Make everything in the world right again. And in our hearts, too. Do what is best—just like you do in heaven, and please do it down here, too. Please give us everything we need today. Forgive us for doing wrong, for hurting you. Forgive us just as we forgive other people when they hurt us.

Rescue us! We need you. We don't want to keep running away and hiding from you. Keep us safe from our enemies. You're strong, God. You can do whatever you want. You are in charge. Now and forever and for always! We think you're great! Amen! Yes we do!

At the time of Jesus, prayer had become a spectator sport. The religious professionals intimidated ordinary folks with their ostentatious prayers. And Jesus said, "This is a sham. They're just showing off. This is the way you should pray..." And then he taught them a simple, modest prayer. How does it start? "Our Father who art in heaven..." Or, as I read, "Hello, Daddy!"

I became a father 24 years ago last Thursday when our little bundle of fire, Rachel, burst into our lives. Rachel spoke to her mom this week and was lamenting her advanced age. She said, "24 years old... I have one foot in the grave!" (Her mom replied, "If you have one foot in the grave, what does that say about your dad?" That wasn't very nice!)

One of the sweetest words I hear comes from my ancient 24-year-old. She still calls me Daddy or Daddio. Am I right, dads? Is there anything sweeter than to hear your little girl, however old she is, call you, "Daddy"? Even if you know you are being worked, even if you feel yourself being wrapped around her little finger, you don't care.

Perhaps the most astonishing thing about the Lord's Prayer is the salutation: "Our Father..." This would have been shockingly impertinent to Jewish listeners. No Jew would call God "Father;" it was inappropriate. One did not address the God of the Universe in such intimate terms. And yet, that's how Jesus prayed. Every time we eavesdrop on his prayers, we hear him addressing God as Father. Or even more shockingly, "Abba." Which was Aramaic for "Daddy." But what gave Jesus the right to pray in this way? We find out back in Matthew 3. Let me tell you a story.

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

The first act of adult Jesus in Matthew is his 90-mile journey from Galilee to a place by the Jordan River where his crazy cousin, John, was baptizing people. John preached a message of repentance: "Don't just claim to be God's children, he said. Live like you belong to the Lord." And as a sign of repentance, he dunked people in the Jordan River. Now baptism wasn't new to the Jews; any Gentile who wanted to convert, had to be baptized. But the idea that someone who was already a Jew would be baptized... that was revolutionary.

John was out in the middle of nowhere but the people came in droves! Even Roman soldiers and religious leaders came. And he baptized them all. But when Jesus showed up, John didn't want anything to do with it. "I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?" John believed that Jesus was the Messiah; the Jewish savior. He didn't feel worthy to baptize Jesus. But Jesus insisted.

And then the fireworks begin. Matthew wants so badly for us to experience what happened, that twice he throws in the word, "Behold" "Look!" Don't miss this! "And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him..."

Did you behold "behold?" The heavens are opened and we behold the Trinity. God the Son, standing there, dripping wet. God the Spirit, descending like a dove upon

God the Son. And then, there's the Voice. I'm not talking about the TV show. The Voice from heaven. Who is that? The Father! And we know that because of the second "behold!" "Behold!" a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

This is one of only two places in the Synoptic Gospels where the Voice speaks audibly. Where is the other? The Transfiguration. And each time, he says almost exactly the same thing: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased..." So, Jesus had the right to pray to Abba (Daddy) because Daddy called him his son in front of everybody!

"But," you might reply, "That's fine for Jesus. But how can he teach us to pray to, "Our father who art in heaven?" What gives us the right to do so?" Back to the baptism. Have you ever wondered why Jesus was baptized? If baptism represents repentance from sin and Jesus was sinless, why did he need baptism? It doesn't make sense. And it didn't make sense to John either. That's why he resisted! But Jesus says, "It's okay. Let's do it for now, because it will fulfill all righteousness." But wasn't Jesus already righteous? What is he talking about?

He's talking about you! And me! Jesus wasn't baptized for his sins. He was baptized for our sins! The sins he would take upon himself on the cross. When Jesus allowed himself to be baptized, he was fulfilling our righteousness. To put it differently, in baptism we are adopted into God's family. God becomes our father because Jesus the Son has become our brother.

Let me illustrate it this way. One of our son Cooper's jobs last year was working as a parking lot attendant at the Rainiers. One night last spring, when Cooper was still at school, Cyndi and I showed up for a game. We reserved tickets and VIP parking and were very excited until the young man at the parking lot told us our name was not on the list. I said, "I'm quite sure it is. I have a record on my phone if you want me to show you." But he replied, "Are you Cooper's parents?" "I said, "Yes we are." He said, "No worries. Come on in; go right to the front of the parking lot!" Turns out I had reserved the wrong night! My bad! But because of my Son's name, I was welcomed in!

That is what we see in this story. We are adopted into the Father's family because of what the Son has done for us. So Jesus can teach us to pray, with remarkable intimacy, "Our father"—and by the way, it's also why the prayer begins, "Our Father..." Jesus doesn't teach us to pray, "My Father." I think most of us assume that's really what he's getting at. I'm praying to my Father about giving me my daily bread and delivering me from evil, but the Lord's Prayer is never singular; it's always plural.

Why? Because, we have been adopted into the family. We are in this together. Right here, in this plural "Our," is a statement about the church. The necessity of the Church. We are saved through and into the church. We are baptized into the

church. In this age of individualism, including Christian individualism, let me say this as clearly as I can: the idea that you can be a Christian all by yourself—that you don't need the church—is heresy! It is false teaching. Jesus made that clear when he taught us to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven."

This image of a Heavenly Father is precious to me, because I have an earthly father who loves and always has—*who* champions me, who considers me precious and expresses his pride in me. Dads, there is no greater gift you can give to your kids than that verbal blessing. If every day you are not saying, out loud, "I love you and I am proud of you" to your kids, you are depriving them of spiritual power. The power of the Father's blessing.

But some of us have a different image of Father. Maybe yours was distant or even worse, abusive. I am so sorry. You deserved better. You deserved the gift of an earthly dad who loved and protected and blessed you. But if Jesus is your brother, then you do have a heavenly father who adores you... who thinks you are priceless and wants you to know it.

Thirteen years ago I had a near fatal accident. When I rebounded from it, I changed the way I lived, including walking Rachel to the bus every morning. One day, after I left her there, a boy started making fun of her about me coming to the bus stop with her every day. In typical Rachel fashion, she snapped back, "If you don't want a relationship with your father, that's your problem." And that was the end of the teasing.

Do you want a relationship with your father? What would happen if your prayer this week, every day, began with, "Hello Daddy!" Would you try it... especially if you never had a good father? Would you be willing to trust those of us who have... to believe us that something better is possible? Would you take the risk to cry out to the Daddy who will never hurt you, never disappoint you, never abandon you—*who* loves you and longs to hear these words from your lips: "Our Father in heaven... Hello Daddy!"