



September 25, 2016  
Pastor Mark Toone  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

*Lord, Teach Us to Pray: Hallowed Be Thy Name*  
Matthew 6:5-13

If you are new to us, we have embarked on a year-long journey of prayer. I have confessed to this congregation that prayer has always been a struggle for me. On again, off again. But I know how desperately I need it... and I know that when I am living a life of intimate relationship with God, it is just better. So I join with the disciple that cried out to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray!" I hope that all of you will make that the cry of your heart, too! Honestly... you start by starting. You just decide, "I am going to pray." And then, you do it!

And it's happening! I'm hearing reports from people who are stretching their prayer muscles. One man shared how he woke up at 2:00am... and couldn't go back to sleep. He remembered our theme last weekend was "Our Father in heaven," so he reflected upon and prayed about his relationship as an adopted child of God the Father.

Then there was 4-year-old Marguerite. After Sunday School her mom was buckling her into her car seat and she said, "'Oh! We should pray every time we get into the car to drive somewhere.' She closed her eyes, bowed her head, put her hands in her lap, and very sincerely and sweetly said, "Lord, please be with us as we drive through our city. And please help Elsa be able to control her powers. We pray all these things in your name. Amen."

In case you didn't understand that last part, Elsa is the queen in the Disney movie *Frozen* who freezes everything she touches. We laugh, but actually, aren't we longing to thaw out our spiritual lives? To have our relationship with God become warmer, more real... like a best friend we talk to? So, I'll ask the weekly question: How are you doing? If you made one step forward in your prayer life last week, raise your hand enthusiastically! Keep using those journals. And keep sending me your prayer reports... including your answered prayers! And I will share them. I grew up in Yakima on a wonderful three-acre alfalfa farm that was bordered by the Wide Hollow Creek. It was an idyllic place to grow up as a kid. There was only one drawback: our little ranch sat directly under the flight approach to the Yakima Airport. And back in those days, we had real jets flying into Yakima... big ones, loud ones.

But here's what's funny about it. We never heard them... not really. After a while, it was just a noise we had grown accustomed to. In fact, it was only when a friend came over and was startled by the sound... that we "heard" it again.

The Lord's Prayer is like that. We have heard it so many times... prayed it so many times... that we don't really hear it any more. It is kind of like religious white noise. When we do pray it, we whip through it without much thought. Which is ironic since, as we heard, Jesus taught his disciples this prayer as an antidote to the mindless repetitions of the praying show-offs. Remember? Those "Extra-Super-Holy People" from our kids' reading last week? The ones who prayed in "extra super holy voices" in order to impress their listeners?

Jesus said, "Don't pray like that. Pray like this." And then, he taught an outline of a simple but profound prayer. Over the next weeks, we are going to listen... really listen... to the words. Even if we've gotten use to this airplane flying overhead, we are going to hear it again for the first time and break it down... and really learn from the Master. "Lord, teach us to pray!" Matthew 6: 5-13.

"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this:

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Last week Jesus taught us that we have the incredible privilege of praying to "Our Father in heaven." Like the airplanes over my house, we've become blasé about those words, but we were reminded that because of Jesus, we have been adopted into God's family. We are children of a heavenly father who leans down from heaven to love and listen and care for us. If you start in prayer by understanding that, because of our brother Jesus, we are invited into a relationship with a loving, attentive heavenly father... that is an incredible revelation!

So we approach God in prayer with those intimate words: "Abba! Daddy!" And now that we have his attention, now what? Today we come to the first petition in the Lord's Prayer: Hallowed be your name. This is perhaps the strangest of petitions in part because of that word: "Hallowed." It is an old English word that fit nicely with the King James Version of the Bible. But surprisingly, some of the best modern translations retain it—ESV, NIV, New RSV, New American Standard—all keep the same opening petition: "Hallowed be your name," because no other English word really means the same thing.

But it is still an odd word to us; a word we don't use. So what does "hallowed" mean? To hallow something means to make it holy. But we aren't very comfortable with that word either, perhaps because in American church life, the holiness movement became associated with strait-laced behavior. To be holy meant you couldn't drink, dance, wear makeup or play cards. Of course holiness has something to do with behavior, but it is much more. In the Bible, to be holy is to be set apart, to be dedicated to the Lord. In Leviticus 26:12, God says, "I will be your God and you will be my people." God "set aside" his people for a special purpose; that is language of holiness.

But even that language is less helpful for us today. To set something apart sounds like marginalizing it... putting it over here in a corner. Tuck it away in a little church box. Dale Bruner suggests that a better definition of "holy" for our time is not that which is set apart but that which is put in the center. What we consider most important, what we consider supreme in our life, the thing we adore and obsess about and plan for and save for and work for... that is what is holy to us.

To pray "hallowed be thy name," then, is to recognize how great and good God is and invite him into the center of our lives. It is to say, "There is no one like you. You are awesome and powerful and utterly unique. You belong in the center of my life and I invite you to take your place."

But I'm still not sure I am conveying the sense of wonder that these words should evoke. So try this. Last Thursday, I went out for my morning prayer walk. As I walked around the edge of the barn, suddenly the mountain just jumped out at me. I don't think I've ever seen it so beautiful. It was backlit by the red light of the rising sun and kissed by a halo of clouds, and I found it so breathtakingly beautiful that I literally stumbled and stopped... and unbidden, the words, "Oh, Lord!" leapt to my lips. I know that's where I will see the mountain every day, and it is always awesome—always the same size, always dominating—but in that moment it was revealed to me in such beauty and prominence and power, that I was overwhelmed. It arrested me.

That's what is going on when Jesus teaches us to pray, "Hallowed be thy name." We are not praising God for being holy—for being supreme and awesome and unique. All those things are true and there are plenty of places in the Bible, especially the psalms, where we are taught to praise God. (By the way, that's what "doxology" means. Doxa means "glory" and doxology is ascribing glory to God for who he is.)

But we aren't told here to pray "Your name is holy." We are taught to pray, "Let your name be made holy." In other words, we are asking God to reveal himself to us, to make apparent to us what is already the case—that he is supreme and awesome and holy—to help us to see God for who he is and give him the center in our life where he belongs.

Back to my mountain story... that experience wasn't something I did. It was something that was done for me, to me. And when that revelation was given to me, I was stopped dead in my track... almost speechless.

Classically, we call this kind of prayer "Adoration," but for many of us, it's the least comfortable... maybe the oddest and coldest part of prayer. One of the guys in my LifeGroup said, "This is the hardest kind of prayer for me. I know how to ask for things. I know how to confess things. I know how to say thank you for things. But this part—where I talk about how good and wonderful and holy God is—that's the hardest kind." Another man chimed in, "Especially for guys! It's kind of mushy! It's hard for men to say mushy things." And all the wives out there are shaking their heads and saying, "Amen!" But there is a way to think about adoration that isn't so mushy.

I'm not a big fan of author Anne Lamott, but the title of her book on prayer is catchy... *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. She captures three traditional types of prayer in three short words. "Help" is what kind of prayer? Supplication. We ask God for things. "Thanks" is obviously Thanksgiving; we express gratitude to God. But the one that jumped out at me was "Wow!" Wow is the prayer of Adoration; we express our love and awe for God. When we pray, "Hallowed be thy name," that feels stiff, artificial, maybe. But if we pray, "Wow! God, you are amazing. There is no one like you. You deserve to be the center of my life. Wow!" Then I think we are getting closer to the meaning. Even guys can pray, "Wow, God! You are amazing!"

I do have one problem with Lamott's title, though. Actually, two problems. She leaves out the important fourth word. "Sorry!" Confession is a huge part of prayer. And here's my other little gripe. She puts "Wow" last. Actually, that is probably how many of us learn to pray. We ask first, we say thank you, and then, maybe, we go "Wow." But Jesus re-orders our prayer life. He puts Wow first. Our Father in heaven... Wow! There is no one and nothing like you! Wow! I don't have words to express it! Wow, will you please put yourself at the center of my life? May the holiness of your name, may your holy character, be at the center of who I am?

But why does Jesus put "Wow" first? Because it is only when we see God for who he is—his holiness, his love, his power—that we really believe he is capable of meeting our needs. When we pray the "help" prayer—Give us this day our daily bread—only if we have a Wow vision of God, can we believe he is actually big enough to take care of our every need. When we pray the "Sorry" prayer—Forgive us our debts—only if we have a Wow vision of God can we believe that he is loving and gracious enough to really, truly forgive.

As another member of my LifeGroup said, "You've got to start with Wow, because if you don't spend time focusing on the Wow you'll never really believe he can do the

rest. Most of us run right past that line, but you can't come to the rest of the prayer until you dwell in that holiness..."

I want to come back to the definition we started with. To hallow something is to place it in the supreme position of importance. To hallow God is to put him in the center of our life. Can you see why this would be the first and most important prayer? If God isn't truly the center—the core, the most important thing to us—then we just become like those Extra Super Holy People who do religious things for display. It's only in secret where you discover what you really adore—what is really most important to you, what makes you say, "Wow!"

And here's the thing. That place is never vacant in our lives. The place of supreme importance that holds what matters most to us... it is never vacant. We always adore something; we always worship something. The question is whether we worship the only one worthy to be adored or some shabby substitute. The only way we can really pray "Hallowed be thy name..." is to remove, to demote whatever fills that place of worship.

This summer our nephew Ian stayed with us for a few days. We love Ian, but he clearly didn't understand the house rules. You see, there is a chair. It's my chair; it is where I sit. Others may use it if I am not present, but when I am home, that chair is to be vacated; it is my throne. But when I walked into the room, Ian was in my chair, and he didn't vacate. So what did I do? Meekly sit in another chair? Not a chance! I popped him with my newspaper and said, "Dude, you're in my chair! Out!"

Problem is Jesus never does that. He says, "I see that you have something else in your central place of worship: your health, your money, your family, your looks, your business, your football. As long as that sits there, I will never hold the proper place of worship in your life. If you want to hallow me—if you want me to be revealed in your life and family and church and world for who I really am—it's not going to happen with me stuffed in your religious cupboard. You invited me by your words to be the center of your life, but until you demote what is sitting in my place, it will never happen."

So what do you need to demote in order to make Jesus the hallowed center of your life? Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Wow!