

## *Lord, Teach Us to Pray*

Matthew 6:7-13

You might be surprised to hear that composing the weekly Prayer Page for the bulletin is a challenging job for us ministers. We sit there every Tuesday morning – Theresa, Suzanne, and I – and we puzzle. What to celebrate, what to ask help for, which tears to shed and for whom and for what? It is not that we doubt the value of prayer. On the contrary, we want to go deep – for our own sakes, for your sake, and for God’s sake. But there is so much to include – personal and common concerns, the nation, the globe, the universe. What is the right way to pray (and of course we know that there is no one right way, time or place to pray)? What are the best words to use – that all people can hear and share as their own? What’s big and what’s small – worthy or unworthy (we are told there is nothing you can’t bring to God in prayer, but I do wonder about asking for a parking space or the Red Sox). Then there is the matter of how to address the Holy One – *Lord God Almighty* as we just sang? Or *Our Father? Our Father and Mother? Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker?*

Clearly we are not the only ones who have wondered about how to pray. Maybe you have had the same questions? And it wasn’t perfectly clear to Jesus’ disciples either. Oh, they knew from their own faith tradition and the psalms that it was good to express gratitude and praise to God and that you could petition and make requests of God – *guide me, heal me, avenge me, O Lord*. And they knew from the prophets of old (like Amos, Isaiah, Hosea, Micah) that God desires justice and kindness and humility not just empty rituals and sacrifices. They knew all this, they were raised on such wisdom and practice. And they knew Jesus didn’t think much of those who showed off in their piety and offered rote prayers. But still they asked, *Lord, teach us to pray* and Jesus gave them the words we know so well.

In fact, we know them so well, and we say them so frequently, that I think we most often lose sight of how radical, how revolutionary, they are. How shocking they are in what they say of God and what they ask for us and from us. Which is as true today as when they were first pronounced 2000 plus years ago to a people in much different circumstances and conditions than we experience nowadays.

Still they hold true and we say the Lord’s Prayer, along with all Christians, in private and in public worship, on our knees or in the pews, eyes closed or open, in English, Spanish and Urdu. We say it from beginning to end in almost one breath. Heaven forbid, we get lost, distracted, or interrupted in the flow and we might have to start back over at the beginning with *Our Father* to catch up with where we left off. Surely I am not the only one here for whom this is true, am I?

The Lord’s Prayer is a beautiful, powerful, compelling, beloved, demanding prayer –far too broad, too encompassing, to parse in one sermon, perhaps even in one lifetime. But how to allow it to touch us deeply, awe us, shake us out of our comfort and familiarity with it? How

to allow it to radicalize us? How can we wake up to what we are really praying when we pray it? Do we dare to ask to whom we address this prayer and what are we really asking for? And what if we get what we ask for? Forgiveness in order to forgive? The world according to God's way, not ours? That's big! Do we wonder how praying this prayer will help us grow in our prayer life, our everyday life and in our intimacy with God?

Big questions – how do we do all that? One way might be to see how another group of people offer this very same prayer in their own language, with their own words and images, out of their own circumstances. I invite you to look at the insert in your bulletin and read with me the Lord's Prayer as has woven together the theological understandings and experience of God by the indigenous people of New Zealand, the Mauri and the Polynesians, with the more formal forms of the Anglican church. Notice how expansively and provocatively they might look upon God from their worldview which is quite different than ours. As you can see it is found in the New Zealand Book of Prayer. Will you pray it with me right now?

### ***The Lord's Prayer***

Eternal Spirit,  
Earth-maker, Pain bearer, Life-giver,  
Source of all that is and that shall be,  
Father and Mother of us all,  
Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe;  
The way of your justice be followed by the  
peoples of the world;  
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings;  
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom  
sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.  
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.  
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.  
From trial too great to endure, spare us.  
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.  
For you reign in the glory of the power that is love,  
now and forever. Amen.

*From New Zealand Book of Prayer, 1997*

If you set this wording alongside the Lord's Prayer that we uttered earlier in the service, surely you see we are praying basically the same prayer to the same God, albeit using different words and images....using different metaphors since by metaphor is the only way we can talk of a divine Force who can't be captured by any word or all words. *Father, King, Lord, Rock* We know God is not really exactly like any one of these. They are sort of "as if" names.... so why not *Earth-maker* as well as many others?

Now I can hear some of you asking....Why do we need to go such a route, make any changes, fix something that doesn't need repair. *Father* was good enough for Jesus, it has been good enough for 2 millennia, it's good enough for me.

And *father* is a good image, drawing our attention in that name to the intimacy of relationship and the function of a parent. Fathers do good things, at least good fathers do. They create (albeit with some invaluable help from partners, co-creators), they protect, they provide for.... families. And mostly we think of families in terms of a collection of human beings related in some way to one another – fathers, mothers, children and a few other relatives thrown in. Human families.

But if we expand our image of God beyond *Father* or even *Father/Mother* God, to *Earth-maker*, we can see God's creative abilities, protection, provisioning for not just human families but for all creation and all creatures – birds and bees, stately trees and lowly mosses, flowing waters and cooling breezes, the lights in the skies, and all the *goods* and the *very goos* that the Genesis story lists. *The earth is the Lord's and everything therein. Source of all that is and that shall be. All! All!* Not just us mortals in our tight little family circles.

And if we truly want to follow the Earth-maker's way of justice and heavenly will, then we have a responsibility to protect and care for what God loves. Which is not something we are doing very well these days. Not very well indeed. In fact, very badly – destroying, devaluing, raping God's earth with polluting, over-harvesting, over-grazing, over-consuming, over-almost-everything except care and respect. Perhaps I had better plant some milkweed to support the monarch butterflies – those gorgeous winged beauties whose numbers are decreasing due to climate change and other regrettable factors. Or maybe write my congressperson about smokestacks and pipelines, let alone the treatment of Muslims who are part of God's creation. But that's another sermon.

So, back to names for God – and now Jesus – in our prayer life. Jesus is God's son, and that name highlights the unique intimate relationship between God and Jesus, but *Pain-bearer* tells us more about how and why Jesus lived, what he did for us, what he does for us, how he shares our circumstances, why we need him. It is not that he is not God's son; it is that he is God's son AND he bears our pain, our sorrow, and consequently offers us hope. We need that heart-connection with him to bear our own pain and suffering. That's our Jesus.

Now there is so much more in that prayer that is rich and worthy of integration, exploration, adoption. If you will, take it home with you, sit with it, try it a couple of times - "taste it" I like to say. See what it adds to your prayer life, your life with God.

I hope you can see that I am not asking you to give up the way that you traditionally pray, not to lay aside what has always been meaningful and precious and foundational for you. Most of us have been praying the Lord's Prayer more or less the same way since we were first able to put petitions into words, and we will probably continue to faithfully do so. But I do believe our prayer life, and thus our connection with an ultimately unnamable

uncontainable God can be expanded, stretched, enriched, enlivened with new images which can shock us into awareness of the magnitude of the God we worship, which can help us to sing *How Great Thou Art* and really mean it, even when we can't begin to comprehend how great the greatness is. I do believe that fresh insights can shock us out of our narrowness and our arrogance that we have the whole picture down pat and know what's best and right.

I am not asking you to change your prayer. *Change* can be a hard word, a threatening concept and reality. Even though we know that change in life is inevitable, still it is challenging. Especially if there is too much of it all at once. I certainly am headed into change in my life, and First Congregational has been going through a period of lots of changes and uncertainties. So instead of a word with demands and heavy connotations like *change*, let's think on this kind of movement in our praying and thinking and imagining as *traveling*. Traveling from home, an abode we know so well, into some new and exciting and unexpected places.

One of my favorite spiritual writers, John O'Donohue, has written a poem/ prayer called *For the Traveler*. Let me read a few lines to you....

*Every time you leave home, Another road takes you Into a world you were never in...*

*When you travel, a new silence goes with you, And if you listen, you will hear what your heart would love to say....*

*A journey can become a sacred thing: Make sure, before you go, to take the time to bless your going forth. To free your heart of ballast so that the compass of your soul might direct you toward the territories of spirit where you will discover more of your hidden life and the urgencies that deserve to claim you.*

*May you travel in an awakened way, gathered wisely into your inner ground: that you may not waste the invitations which wait along the way to transform you.*

*May you travel safely, arrive refreshed, and live your time away to the fullest; return home more enriched, and free to balance the gift of days which call you.*

Indeed, as travelers, may we be bonded together in prayer, startled by new words and images and insights, awakened to more of ourselves and more of our God. In our prayer, however we voice it, aloud or in silence, may we hear and speak deep yearnings, may we be transformed at a profound level, and empowered to go forth to live our prayers and to do God's will in the commonwealth of peace and freedom which is heaven, heaven where we find God in this earth, loving and caring for everything, everything including but not limited to us - everything that God has created and is creating still.

Let us *travel* so that we might be startled, awakened, refreshed, freed up and able to return home safe and sound into the warm embrace of our Earth-making, pain-bearing, life-giving Three-in-One God who hears the prayers we offer in the many names of our God.

**May it be so. Amen.**

**Sermon preached by Susan Power Trucksess**

**First Congregational Church in Branford**

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**Notes:**

**Thoughts and insights drawn from: *The Greatest Prayer* by John Dominic Crossan; *The Lord's Prayer* as found in the *New Zealand Book of Prayer*; John O'Donohue's *For the Traveler*.**