

Today we begin a look, piece by piece of the prayer that Christ himself gave to us. Words that have gone up from the altars of great cathedrals, from the mud huts of the poor, from battlefields and hospital beds. Luther once referred to this prayer as the world's greatest martyr in our mouths, because of our sinful habit to murder it with mindless repetition, speaking the words without caring a bit about what we're saying. But sometimes at the worst of that something comes along to shake us from our complacency. Something comes to break us and make us cling to the words of this prayer anew. We see it again as a light shining in the dark.

And why does it do this for us? We often times make the point that speaking to God is not a means of grace, prayer alone is not a way that God communicates to us it is not a means that he uses to strengthen us and build our faith. So why do we speak of the Lord's prayer differently? Because the word of God himself is in it. To think that you can maintain your relationship with God by yourself by praying to him occasionally is a mistaken notion, God talks to us on the pages of the Bible. We'll come back to that. But here is a prayer with the word of God running through it. Here Jesus himself bows our heads for us and teaches us how to talk with our Father, how to think the thoughts of God after him. Jesus gives us a pattern, a template. How to come to God. What to say to God. What to expect from God.

In the Sermon the Mount, in the prelude to giving us the Lord's Prayer, Jesus posts a few flashing caution lights for us. He warns against prayer that is only done for mere show. He asks us to be aware of our own motives. After all, in prayer we are not talking to the people around us, and not even to ourselves. We are talking to our Father. It is too easy for our pride to poison God's grace. Still, Jesus offers these cautions to his disciples three times with the words: "When you pray..." He assumes that they pray. A Christian who does not pray is like a lung that does not breathe, a heart that does not beat.

Well, if this is true, why should Jesus have to teach us how to pray? And why would his disciples ask him to do this very thing in the Gospel of Luke, saying: "Lord, teach us to pray?" Because we are complicated and contradictory creatures because of sin. What comes naturally to our Christian nature is not at all natural to our sinful nature. We debate prayer rather than do it. We are inclined to doubt whether there really is a God who hears, a God who knows us personally and individually, a God who cares, a God who is our Father. Maybe prayer is just a psychological gimmick to lower my blood pressure, a placebo that just makes me feel better. Or Satan injects the thought: "God wants nothing to do with you. You have no right to pray. Why should God listen to you? Your sinful past is a disgusting. Your closet is crammed with skeletons. Your current behavior has put you at the back of the line. Maybe other people stand a chance at getting an audience with the King, but not you!"

So Jesus must tell us we need to pray, and how to pray. Prayer has both God's command and God's promise. It is a sin not to pray, just like it is a sin to trample under any other commandment of God. It is also a sin to doubt God's promise, to pray in doubt, to think that God has not cleared a path to his throne through the blood of his own Son, to think that he who invited us to come to him, who taught us the very words to say, would now go back on his word and chase us away. In the face of those sinful doubts we must remember, it is Christ himself who has taught us to call God our Father. It is because of Christ that we can. He said: "**No one comes to the Father except through me.**" (Jn 14:6b).

So here Christ folds our hands and says: "Here is how you must talk to God as his adopted sons and daughters. Here is how you must address him, think of him: '**Our Father, who art in heaven...**'" Let's not skip over the word: "**Our...**" Even when one of us prays this prayer all alone in our rooms at night, we still say, "Our" just as Jesus taught, and in doing so we place ourselves in league with a million other hearts in the invisible Church of true believers, the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. In so saying, we confess that this relationship with our Father is no solo act. This little word "our" is a summons to the house of our Father where others gather to worship too. This is not a commitment or confession that we are bound with everyone who speaks it even if they speak it hypocritically. We are not bound by the lies of others, God does not hold us accountable for that. It is a solid confession that we are joined with a larger group of believers, same as how we use "we" when we speak the Nicene Creed.

Because there are those who speak without meaning. That happens both in and out of the space of a church building. It's been said that many go to church just to go to church. They go out of a sense of obligation but only go to occupy a pew for an hour and then go home. They don't listen and they don't mean anything they say even if they do participate. But that kind of person has produced something of a backlash in another misguided form, the person who abandons the church because it's full of mindless zombies and hypocrites. This is the kind of person we alluded to earlier, the one who thinks that they're plenty spiritual because they talk to God a lot.

That's a one-way conversation. When does Jesus get a word in edgewise? Jesus said: "**Where two or three are**

**gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.”** (Mt 18:20). When the New Testament Church sprung to life, the Bible says: **“They were all together in one place.”** (Ac 2:1). The Bible reminds us: **“Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”** (Ro 10:17). To some discouraged Hebrew Christians, the writer said: **“Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.”** (He 10:25). For all the phony hearts and heartless repetition that can infect the visible church, it is still true that Christ comes to us through the Word and Sacraments alone.

To forget Christ’s word “our” and make of our prayer a solo act is to turn our relationship with God into a one-way conversation where we do all of the talking. Then prayer becomes an attempt to boss God around, get him to adjust his will and word to our way of thinking, even throw a cloak of piety over a sinful life with thoughts like, “Well, I’ve talked to God about this and I know he wants me to be happy, and I think God would want me to do this or whatever...God and I, we have this private understanding...blah, blah, blah.” God tells you what he wants. He has written it down in a book. He has promised to come among his people through Word and Sacrament. So the word is “our.”

“Our **Father**, who art in heaven.” We would not believe this if Jesus himself had not taught us to say this. Have you ever noticed in some of our more ancient prayers given down to us by the first church fathers, just how much time is spent addressing God before you get to what the prayer’s really about? For example: “Almighty and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we to pray and art accustomed to give more than either we desire or deserve...” Or: “Almighty and everlasting God, who of Thine infinite mercy hast made us Thy children by faith in Thy dear Son, and through Him hast begotten us again unto a lively hope, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for us, we beseech Thee...” And then, and only then, the prayer gets around to the thing for which we are asking God.

It isn’t that the church fathers of centuries gone by were just long winded, or that they wanted to babble like pagans, the thing Jesus warns about. The ancient fathers were men of prayer. Fellowship with God was the air they breathed. And you sense in their calling out to God, in their addressing him as the Father who sent his Son to redeem us and wash away our sins...you sense that for them, prayer was not so much about getting some specific thing they wanted. It was about getting through to God, laying hold of God, standing in the very presence of God, by the merits of Jesus Christ their Savior. All else is secondary. The real prayer is already answered, the real need already met if I can just get through to this God who has become my Father in Christ Jesus. That relationship which enables him to listen to me has already solved everything.

Our darker side may object, we may cry about the trifles we don’t get and ignore the greatest treasure he has already given. Not that some of those arguments aren’t convincing in our own minds at the time: Father? Really? What kind of father would take away my loved one? What kind of father allows heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer’s, accidents and the wars that send young men home in flag-draped coffins? But he who taught us to pray this prayer, to fall into the arms of God and call Him “Father,” is not any happier with this broken world than you or I. He knows how deep the sorrows caused by sin and Satan, disease and death run. He was the one picked it all up and made it his own.

It is true that our Father allows the dark powers to strut on the stage in seeming lordship, but only briefly. This is still our Father’s world and he holds these dark powers to his divine purposes and drives them to do his bidding to our ultimate blessing.

So Jesus teaches us to pray: *Our Father **who art in heaven***. Our Father is in heaven, over all, in absolute control of the universe. If we get no further than this one word – “Father” – the most important thing has already happened. If the all-powerful Creator and Ruler of the universe is also my Father by faith in Jesus, then nothing can go too far wrong in my life – for then nothing can happen to me or touch me without his permission, without his control. If God is our Father, then sufferings become trials which refine faith into gold. If God is our Father, then death itself must become the door to eternal life and deliverance from this unfatherly world.

And precisely because, as Jesus says, our heavenly Father knows what things we have need of even before we ask him, he will spell out in this prayer the things we *ought* to ask of God. A child who really needs new socks and shoes may prefer a video game. A child who needs to eat his vegetables may whine for ice cream. The crying child who wants to stay up late really needs a good night’s sleep. Have you ever looked back with a sigh of thanks to God for *not* giving you something you wanted? Our Father will always treat us in love. He may deny the letter of our request in order to spare us grief here or hereafter. We don’t always know how to pray. The Holy Spirit will help us, says the Bible. He will translate our prayers into the ear of the Father so that we receive what is best for us.

Brothers and sisters, let us find new peace and joy again in saying: **“Our Father who art in heaven.”** Our brother laid down his life so we could say it. Amen.