

The Lord's Prayer: Week 1
"Our Father, in Heaven"
 October 13 & 16, 2022

In Matthew 6: 9-13, specifically in the New Revised Standard Updated Edition translation, Jesus says,

“ 9 Pray, then, in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

may your name be revered as holy.

10 May your kingdom come.

May your will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

11 Give us today our daily bread.

12 And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.

I don't mean to over-explain this scripture if you knew this is how it is written. Or if you are kind of surprised that it sounds a little different than what you learned the first time you heard it. We are going to work through the whole prayer in the next few weeks, basically, we are going line by line. This means that today's sermon is entirely centered around 4 words. Our Father, in Heaven.

There is a paradox in the first line of the Lord's prayer. We have our father- immediately, we know we have a parent relationship here. Then, we say, in heaven. Or- if you learned the King James version, Who Art in Heaven... somehow that feels even bigger and fancier and further away. But the point of the line is, we have a parent... the closest connection in some families, but that parent is far away. Closeness in the distance of different realms. How do we hold this paradox in one line?

I don't know if you'll have the answer to that question at the end of this sermon, but we can work through it together! And if you have more questions- Scott is HAPPY to get those by email... Just kidding, we both are happy to talk more about any of this because the paradoxes that we have to hold are difficult to carry alone.

Our...

Well, we already have a bold statement. We are one word in!

What does it mean to have a community that carries all of this together? A lot of times, prayers are written in a personal, and singular, phrasing. We see a lot of prayers written in the Psalms, for example, a classic one is the first line of Psalm 130: "I Out of the depths I cry to you,

O Lord.2 Lord, hear my voice!” That is a perfect example of using “I” and “my” language for prayer instead of using a whole community’s voice collectively.

We, as humans, often don’t have a context for holding prayer together as an entire community. And yet, Jesus is teaching us specifically that we are meant to pray this in community with other people.

So we get to the obvious question- who counts? What does it mean to be in a community? Well, we just finished a whole study of a deep faith in community through Deep. If you’ve missed those sermons- feel free to go back to them on the website. I would like to suggest, however, that this prayer is actually referring to a broader community. This community is all of creation, everyone praying this prayer together. Our. Notice that it doesn’t say “The ones of us who are in church today’s Father,” or “The Presbyterians’ Father,” It doesn’t even say “The pastors’ father”... Our. That means you’re included! Even if you don’t know all the answers. If you do know all the answers- please let me know! We will get coffee this week, I have some questions. Even if you’re not even sure what this all means right now, you’re included. Even if you think that maybe we’re all a little bit insane and it’s really not a convenient time for you- you’re included. There is a different verse in Matthew, Matthew 18: 19-20
 “19 Again, I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.” There are at least 2 or 3 people in here! We’re doing good!

Community is important to and in our faith. At the beginning of this sermon, I mentioned that we couldn’t hold the paradoxes of this line on our own. Luckily, we aren’t being asked to. We are being pulled into a community in the very first word. And the fact that it’s from scripture, we know that this community is extended across time and space as well. We most often say this prayer during communion here. Actually, we will say it in just a little bit. You’ll hear a LOT about it in the next few weeks. But what it does during communion, and how it functions, is that everyone who celebrates Communion says the Lord’s prayer as a part of it. All the way back to the first century, Jesus told people to pray in this way. That is more people than we can even begin to comprehend. And you are included. Someone in Scotland, or a catholic kid on the East Coast, or someone who is only just learning about the Christian faith in the North West, all of them are going to say this prayer- it may sound a little different, but the spirit of the prayer is there. There may be a lot more Thees and Thys, or maybe there will be a line about transgressions instead of debts, but regardless of the specifics of it, they are saying the same prayer. Everyone around the world, across time... Our Father.

Our Father.

Obviously, we’re seeing a parent relationship here. And I don’t want to focus for too long on the Gender of God... that’s capitalized here, because it feels like a Big Scary Topic to bring up. I want to encourage you to picture God. Really... Chris has gotten us comfy with clapping... you’re allowed to close your eyes, and really take a moment to picture God. Okay, you can open them again.

God may be a father for you. Maybe your relationship with your dad is Fantastic and he was absolutely a spiritual leader, so God as a Father feels perfect. Maybe you didn't know your father as well as some other people, or he wasn't the spiritual leader of your life, and God as Father doesn't quite fit. There is ALL the language in our Bible pointing to Father... but there are also PLENTY of images in our Bible that point to Mother. One of my favorites,

“Isaiah 49: 15

15 Can a woman forget her nursing child,
fail to pity the child of her womb?

Even these may forget,

but [God] won't forget you.”

I edited this just a tiny bit, changing I won't forget you, to God won't forget you. But it is the Lord who is speaking in this particular passage. God is a mother who will never forget her child. God is a mother hen, gathering her chicks under her wings, shielding and protecting them. But maybe you don't need an image of God as a Mother. Your mom was GREAT, and you don't need God to be Mother for you.

Maybe the name of God is a strong tower (that is from Proverbs)... God is protecting you from every single thing that's been thrown at you. That sounds awesome. But maybe you've never felt a need for a tower. You just need a rock, a comfy place to land, or a safe feeling that overwhelms you. That is all okay. Personally, I picture God as a really specific amorphous blob out in the Cosmos. God's always dark purple... with lightning in tune with God's speaking in my mind. That's embarrassing to tell you. Here's a picture that I drew. What I'm saying is if you need a parent out of God, God is that parent. If you need a tower out of God, or a protective animal, God's GOT YOU! If you need an amorphous blob in the cosmos, God can hold that image as well. There isn't a wrong way to see God. And we can't dictate what God looks like or functions as for everyone else. Jesus saw God as Father. So, that's how Jesus talked to us about God. We are blessed enough to have his words still eloquently written for us.

So, when we say Our Father, we are living into Jesus's idea of God as Father. Our Creator... Our Parent. This is often one of the most impactful relationships in a person's life. To be a parent, and to function as a parent is something that I don't fully understand yet. But, I know what it's like to “have kids”... not in the literal sense. But when I talk about the Youth, or when I was a camp director making sure everyone was safe, or when I was nannying, I always fall back into saying, “My Kids...” I know I don't love them in the same way as their parents do, I know that I can't understand that exact love yet. But I do love them more than words can explain. I believe God is looking at all of us as a parent, a creator, so when we speak to God in this prayer, we call God our Father. We're asking God to accept the responsibility of being a parent for us. To teach us, to mold us, to keep us safe, to make sure we're loved and supported throughout our day-to-day interactions, and to answer when we call. Maybe that one is a stretch of a responsibility... I called my dad on his birthday last week and it took him 4 hours to call me back. That's okay. But we expect to be able to talk fairly freely and be in relationship with a parent.

Our Father is a fairly chill way to begin a prayer, though. We don't have to open a portal, we don't have to go to a specific place, and we don't have to be perfect that day to talk to God. We just talk. And God is there. That takes a shockingly close relationship. It's like when you were a kid and you didn't want to leave the couch cause you were comfy, and you would just shout to whoever was in the kitchen to bring an extra glass of water on their way back... Just me? Okay. But there wasn't a previous conversation there. There wasn't a formal start or end... you just spoke. There was a closeness that was understood.

Our Father, in Heaven.

We've reached the paradox. That shockingly close relationship. The one we hold with God even though this community is the entire world of believers forever. This relationship spans multiple realms. How do we hold such a close relationship when we are stuck in the Earthly Realm while God parties it up in Heaven? In John 14: 1-4, Jesus says 1 "Don't be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. 2 My Father's house has room to spare. If that weren't the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you? 3 When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am, you will be too. 4 You know the way to the place I'm going." So we know that God has room to spare, you don't even have to share a room with someone! Don't get me wrong... Earth is... Fine. But with the promise of Heaven, we know that God is doing such incredible things. I had a professor in Seminary who asked us where Heaven was once. And even as future pastor students, every single one of us just kinda pointed up. Then that professor broke our brains a little bit. "What if you just can't perceive it? What if it is in a different dimension of this place?" He encouraged us to try to see heaven here. Or what it would look like to see heaven here. To see where God was already at work.

Now, I firmly believe that Heaven is a different realm, but I also really enjoy the thought process of trying to figure out if Heaven is really just a different dimension that we, as EarthBound humans, can't see yet. There also seems to be some truth in the Earthly Realm having "thin places" where the Earth and Heaven are a little closer than normal... where you can feel heaven just on the other side of an invisible barrier. Montreat, NC, is considered one of them by many people. I truly hope that Heaven is a place of warmth, love, sunshine, and peace. But I think my professor had an interesting point- what if Heaven is just not perceivable by us yet? Where (and how) do we create heaven for each other? That would make it much easier to hold the paradox. If heaven is a mindset, and if God is already there, and we are able to create that space for each other, it seems like it would be a little easier.

The distance of realms feels difficult to span. But God is reaching for us all the time. God is bringing themselves closer to us. God is asking us to be close and fight to stay close. Even when everything in this world seems to try to pull us apart and overwhelm us. God is asking us to be close. To rely on God to hold that close relationship that doesn't need any deeper explanation. Just comfort and love. Truly, that is what I am encouraging you to center yourself on in the next

several weeks. How does this prayer speak to you? How do you see it in your life? Where is God already working?

Please pray with me, we will end this prayer with the Lord's Prayer, which will be up on the screen. But- if there is a language or wording that is closer to your heart, please feel free to use that. This is your prayer.

God, who is already in that perfect place, full of good things, and good people, and we hope pets... help us get to be that space for other people. Help us find that space in the communities of believers that we find ourselves within. Help us see the relationships that you bring into our lives and hearts so that we can be your hands and feet for people in all spaces of our lives.

Jesus, you taught us to pray, Our Father, in Heaven...