

AS JESUS TAUGHT US TO PRAY

A sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey Barz-Snell

The First Parish Church in Weston
Unitarian Universalist

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THE FIRST PARISH CHURCH IN WESTON
Unitarian Universalist
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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Jeffrey Barz-Snell at the First Parish Church
in Weston.

Opening Meditation:

“If the only prayer you say in your whole life is ‘thank you,’
that would suffice.”

~ Meister Eckhart

Readings:

1. Psalm 54
2. Matthew 6: 5-15

Reading:

Matthew 6: 5-15

From the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’s words on prayer:

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever 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.

“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“Pray then in this way: 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 do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Sermon:

This morning I would like to begin with a version of the Lord’s Prayer, the most ancient and most widely used prayer in Christianity. Some years ago a group of New Testament scholars and UU ministers gathered together and

attempted to compose a new translation of the Lord's Prayer. Given the politically correct and intellectual ethos present in most academic institutions today, their translation sounded something like this:

Our Reification of Patriarchal Authority, who can be said to inhabit the positively valorized polarity of the metaphysical sphere, privileged be thy signifier.

Thy societal structure achieve hegemony, the enactment of thy desire be manifested, throughout the axis represented by the physical-metaphysical dichotomy.

Empower us this day with the means of material production and refuse to enforce sanctions against our transgressive subversions of moral perspective, as we refuse to delegitimize the moral perspective of the Other.

And Refer us not to the thetical term of the dialectics of desire, but liberate us from the intrinsically limiting concept of "evil."

For thine is the hegemony, and the dominance, and the culturally determined mystification thereof, within the entire continuum of the Western concept of linear time. Amen.

*(Roger Giner-Sorolla * New York University * Dept. of Psychology)*

This parody of the Lord's Prayer was written by a professor of psychology at NYU. Clearly, his tongue was planted firmly in his cheek. It does make you think, though: sometimes it is easy to take something or someone we have known for a long time for granted until we consider it from another angle or hear it anew. It is really quite easy and natural to do. According to behavior theory in psychology, we human beings respond most to new stimuli in our environment. As we become used to, or habituated to, that stimulus, it starts to take up less and less of our attention. It becomes rote. It is always there, and we really do not pay much attention to it after a while, especially if it does not seem vital or germane to the current issues in our lives.

In some ways I wonder if this happens to us with respect to the Lord's Prayer. Each week, at the same time during the service, we are invited to pray the way Jesus taught us to pray. We then proceed to recite this ancient prayer, almost always in the same rhythm and cadence.

And yet, this small prayer that we pray together each week is one of the most important aspects of our service. To pray it is to participate in an

ancient ritual and tradition going back probably to Jesus himself. Praying it and paying attention to it has had and can have profound effects on those who use it as a prayer. For in it, we are given a powerful insight into how Jesus perceived his relationship – and our relationship – to the divine and to our lives.

The version we heard read this morning from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew is the one that everyone knows. There is another version of the same prayer in Luke's Gospel, but it is shorter, missing the line "Thy kingdom come..." Still, in both versions, this prayer is given by Jesus after being asked by the disciples how they should pray. This, then, is Jesus's teaching about what is important in a prayer.

And what is *not* included in the prayer is, in some ways, as interesting as what is included. There is no mention of proper Christian belief, such as the Trinity or the nature of Jesus. The prayer does not contain any direction about proper practice or correct theology. Rather, the Lord's Prayer elegantly and compellingly communicates a perspective on the Divine and an outlook on our lives. It provides a way for prioritizing what is important in our religious lives and gives a structure to those who are challenged in their prayer lives, or lack thereof.

At times in our lives, we all pray. Think about the times during the day when you might exclaim "Oh God" or take the Lord's name in vain. Yes, it is a habit and a culturally conditioned response to stress in our lives. But it is more than that. In some ways, we human beings are almost wired for prayer. We naturally seem to fall into it the moment that we are amidst adversity and feel like we are not in control of a situation. There is a famous quotation about wartime that says, "There are no atheists in foxholes." What this suggests is that the times in our lives when we are most inclined to pray are when we are afraid or amidst a mess. Ultimately, the impulse for prayer arises out of our own fears and anxieties – out of our need for attempting to control a situation. We hope that God might just somehow get us out of our current predicament.

The Lord's Prayer seems to be designed to take all of us who are inclined to think of prayer in this way and to turn our agendas and assumptions on their head. Instead of beginning with our needs, instead of immediately asserting our own self-centered agenda, it begins with "Our Father." Instead of assuring that *our* will be done, it leads us to ask that *Thy* will be done.

Given the richness of this ancient prayer, I plan to spend this sermon, and a few others over the next few months, exploring and unpacking some of its

meaning and implications. This will be more or less a monthly series. Starting with “Our Father,” we will work our way through the prayer and consider its meaning and implications to us here in the 21st century, almost two thousand years after it was first taught.

We all know the prayer’s first phrase, “Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name.” It seems straightforward enough. No big deal. Right? Wrong. It was – and is – actually quite radical and powerful. To appreciate the significance of this address as the beginning of Jesus’s prayer, we have to understand a little more about the first-century Mediterranean society in which Jesus was teaching. In the ancient world, Jesus’s address to his God would have been considered quite unusual to the many different audiences who first heard this prayer.

To his fellow Jews, beginning the prayer with “Our Father” the way Jesus did would have gotten their attention in a hurry for two reasons. First, Jesus spoke an ancient variant of Hebrew called Aramaic. When he said “Our Father,” he used an informal version of the word for father, a version that would indicate familiarity and intimacy. This is lost in the translation. In some ways a better rendering of the original would be “Our Dearest Father” or even “Our Daddy.” Can you imagine if we began reciting the Lord’s Prayer this way?! “Our Daddy, who art in heaven.” Still, that is how it would have sounded to his fellow Jews at the time. While there was a long tradition within Judaism of thinking of their God as a parent – and in most of those cases as father – the way and style in which Jesus proceeded to do so would have been unusual. The genius, then, of the prayer is that Jesus juxtaposes this very informal and personal version of Father with the notion that God was in heaven.

The second way in which Jesus’s use of “Father” got the attention of his fellow Jews is in its revolutionary implications. The very first time that the Jews are said to be children of God is when Moses confronts Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus. As Moses demands that his people be liberated from their oppression, he declares to Pharaoh: “Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son...Let him go that he may worship me.” In many ways, God’s fatherhood of Israel was always connected to deliverance from its oppressors. For Jewish listeners to Jesus’s teachings on prayer who were living under Roman rule and persecution, “Our Father, who art in heaven” was language indicating that deliverance was at hand.

N.T. Wright, the well-known New Testament scholar and Anglican priest (who I note has lectured here at First Parish some years ago), observes in his book on the Lord’s Prayer that

“The very first words of the ... Prayer, therefore contain within them not just intimacy, but revolution. Not just familiarity, but hope.”

(The Lord and His Prayer, p. 15)

Thus, the opening line to this prayer addresses the Divine as both a loving, caring presence and a transcendent power worthy of reverence and praise. “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” It sets up the classic Christian view of God. God’s love and God’s holiness are held up simultaneously.

This would have been a new and radically different notion to other listeners of Jesus as well. While Christianity as a movement began as a Jewish sect, it quickly caught on with the Gentiles, the Greek-speaking non-Jews who made up the majority of the Roman Empire. Paul, the person who wrote most of the New Testament, described himself as an apostle to the Gentiles. And how would this prayer have sounded to the Gentiles of the ancient world who heard it for the first time? Probably quite strange. Remember that the larger Roman world was polytheistic, unlike the Jews in Palestine. Rome had their pantheon of gods, and human beings were at the mercy of these sometimes selfish, always unpredictable gods. Indeed, the mythology of Greece and Rome seemed to indicate that the gods did not even really like humans all that much. And minor deities, or Titans, that actually tried to help humans were often punished or cursed. Has anyone heard of the story of Prometheus, for example?

The story of Prometheus illustrates this perfectly. Prometheus, you may remember, was the god who brought fire to human beings. Having pity on us poor humans, Prometheus gave to us the gift of flame so that we could cook our food and stay warm. For this act of compassion, Zeus punished Prometheus and bound him to a rock in the middle of the Adriatic Sea, where he was tortured by the heat and thirst of the day and the cold of the night. What is worse, Zeus had a vulture come each day and tear out Prometheus’s liver, which at night grew back again so that the vulture could return and do it again the next day.

For ancient Romans and Greeks, the gods were not always benevolent and were certainly not seen as having parental love for humanity. The gods were viewed as inscrutable and full of caprice. They were to be placated and feared.

So picture this young, itinerant Rabbi from the Judean countryside who comes along and tells you that there is only one God and that we can call him not just Father but “Dad.” Imagine this young, charismatic, and remarkable preacher who declares that the divine being who is at the heart

of the Cosmos somehow cares about each of us and feels our sense of injustice and hurt about the world. Not only is there an all-powerful God but at the heart of the divine is not indifference but love and compassion. This, then, is how Gentiles would have heard Jesus's teaching about prayer. In its own way, it was radical as well.

And such a teaching is radical to this day. To think of God as Father – or as Mother – can be a wonderful and disturbing proposition for people. Certainly, there are times when we may not want to hear such an assertion. There are times in our lives when some of us don't very much like or respect ourselves. There are times when we think of ourselves as wholly unworthy and lower than the lowest thing that crawls upon the earth. The heart knows its own bitterness, and no one knows their unworthiness better than him- or herself. The author Mark Rutherford one time suggested that we add a new beatitude: "Blessed are those who heal us of our own despisings."

For some people, this is what God does. Amidst these grim, bleak, terrible moments when all we want to do is beat ourselves up, we can still remind ourselves that, even if we matter to no one else, we matter to the Divine. Amidst the ups and downs of our lives, we can remember that there is a caring presence in the universe who urges us on towards a spirit of compassion and love. This is but one of the implications when we pray as Jesus taught us "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name."

Ah, but as we all know, the prayer has just started. This is just the beginning address. It is the next line where we hear Jesus's agenda come to the fore: *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* In a sense, once Jesus has established our relationship to God, he then moves us to think about his vision of the world – the coming kingdom of God. And this kingdom, as we may already have an inkling, is unlike any that we have ever known. In it are the promises of deliverance from oppression and the triumph of justice. The line "Thy kingdom come..." is explained in the prayer itself. The kingdom of God will be ushered in when earth is arranged so it is like heaven. To use a line from the prophet Amos, and one made famous in our time by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the kingdom of God will arrive when "justice runs down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24).

It's actually a remarkable thing to pray – "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done...." It is a prayer to make the world a place more congruent with the values we associate with the Divine. O God, make the world more compassionate, more fair, more transparent. O God, make the world more loving and understanding.

It's interesting: every so often I will hear comments from certain people that they prefer that their church or religious tradition not comment or make claims about larger society and our day-to-day world. It dilutes the spiritual message. And yet when we say the Lord's Prayer each week, we are actually asking the Divine to help us make the world a little bit more like it could and should be, not as it is. I find that when people tell me that they don't approve of any politics in church, typically what they are telling me is they don't approve of anyone challenging their neoliberal beliefs that markets should solve all our problems and that unregulated capitalism is the only way to operate an economy. And yet, we know that markets don't always work. Ten years ago this month, such assumptions almost drove our economy off of a cliff. RIP Lehman Brothers. But I digress....

I note that many folks from more conservative theological traditions in this country do not think twice about publicly declaring how they would like to change our country and society. Some of the most well-known preachers in America, people like Franklin Graham, believe it is perfectly fine to endorse politicians and Supreme Court justices from the pulpit, even when that endorsement could result in limiting the rights of women and minorities and leading us to runaway climate change.

With respect to women, let me just say that as a Christian minister and a Unitarian Universalist, I believe that abortion is always a tragic option. But I also believe that the only thing more tragic than terminating a pregnancy is taking away a woman's right to make decisions about her body. We are about to put in place a Supreme Court that could potentially take away that right, and I believe that would be a travesty, especially since a majority of the American public affirms the rights of women to make their own personal healthcare decisions. But I digress, again....

The religion of Jesus is always personal, but it can never be entirely private. Jesus had a real vision for this world, not just the next one. This is clear in the language he used, which becomes especially clear when you go back and look at the original text of the Gospels, written in the ancient Greek dialect called Koiné. The word Jesus used for kingdom was "basilay-ah," or "baseelows," depending on how the noun was used or declined. This word for kingdom was related and very similar to the word that the Romans used for the large civic buildings where offices of the regional government were housed. They were often called "basilocos," and were typically these enormously impressive buildings with a large main entrance and community hall with vaulted ceilings that were connected to side rooms or areas with a lower roof. This is where municipal offices for the province were located. In fact, these buildings were so impressive that as the Roman Empire converted to Christianity, they turned some of these buildings into

churches, what were and are called “basilicas.” Christians for the last 1,800 years have actually used the same architecture and design in their major churches and buildings. We call them “cathedrals,” with the most ancient of them still called basilicas.

When Jesus talked about the coming kingdom of God, he was using a word related to the Roman Civic or Town Halls. For anyone who asserts that the kingdom Jesus had in mind was just “spiritual,” think again. His listeners would have immediately recognized the real-world implications of what he was declaring.

The coming kingdom of God is then a vision. It is an expectation and a radical hope that charges the religious life and life in general with excitement and possibility. And we pray for it every time we recite this simple prayer taught two millennia ago.

This morning, I would like to close with another version of the Lord's Prayer that picks up on this idea of the kingdom. It is an adaptation written by the Unitarian Minister Jacob Trapp.

O Thou, whose kingdom is within, may all thy names be hallowed. May no one of them be turned against the others to divide those who address Thee.

May thy presence be made known to us in mercy, beauty, love and justice. May thy kingdom come to be in the life of all humankind. May it come with peace, with sharing, and in a near time.

Give us this day our daily bread, free from all envy and alienation, broken and blessed in the sharing.

Keep us from trespass against others, and from the feeling that others are trespassing against us. Forgive us more than we have forgiven.

Deliver us from being tempted by lesser things to be heedless of the one great thing: the gift of thyself in us. Amen.

It is my prayer this morning that we will open ourselves up to hear the Lord's Prayer in ways that are fresh and new, and consider for ourselves what it means to make God's kingdom even a little bit more real in an angry and divided world. Amen.