In the gospel of Luke, the disciples come to Jesus and ask, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." Surely, the disciples knew how to pray. But just as surely they did not know how to pray as JESUS PRAYED.

Like those disciples, we too know how to pray – but we struggle to pray as JESUS PRAYED. In our confessions we acknowledge “In life and in death we belong to God.” We pray “give us this day our daily bread.” But we find it ever so hard to live in simple and complete dependence on God and God alone. It is easy to ask God’s complete forgiveness of OUR sins. It is hard to extend that same gracious forgiveness to others. How very difficult it is to pray, REALLY pray, “THY kingdom come, THY will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.”

The words of the Lord’s Prayer fall ever so easily from our lips. Learning the Lord’s Prayer and reciting the Lord’s Prayer is easy. The hard part is LIVING the Lord’s Prayer. So this Lenten Season I invite you to join me in reflecting on the Lord’s Prayer as a guide for living the Christian life.

Along with the sacraments of baptism and holy communion, the Lord’s Prayer stands among the most ancient features of Christian worship. And since the prayer, unlike the sacraments, is completely “portable”, the recitation of our Lord’s Prayer is also the most widespread of all Christian devotional practices.

The Lord’s Prayer is not only very old. It is also very likely directly from the heart and lips of Jesus. The prayer has come down to us in two forms – the more familiar version from Matthew, and the one from Luke read today. Luke’s version is shorter. Matthew adds the petitions “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” and “deliver us from evil”. Some manuscripts add the familiar doxology, “for thine is the power and the glory for ever”. The consensus of scholars is that Luke’s version is the one closest to the prayer Jesus actually taught. NT scholar Joachim Jeremias suggested the two versions of the prayer represent two audiences for the gospels containing the prayer: Matthew’s teaching on prayer was directed to Jewish Christians who indeed already knew HOW to pray, but whose prayer lives were in dire need of rejuvenation. Luke’s version was intended for gentile converts to Christian faith – persons who needed courage and encouragement to pray: they literally needed someone to teach them “how to pray”.

And I dare say, many of us, even though we have been praying all our lives, are still learning how to pray.

The opening words to the Lord’s Prayer lead us straight to the faith of Jesus: OUR FATHER. Others before Jesus spoke of God as “father”. But the great faith insight of Jesus was that we have a personal relationship with God so intimate that we dare to pray to God our Father. When Jesus prayed to “Our Father” the prayer opened with a direct address to God. The Aramaic word of Jesus’ native tongue was ABBA, or “dear father” – often translated as “Daddy”. For sure “Daddy” conveys the level of loving intimacy Jesus was reaching for. But in our family relationships “daddy” may be a little too cavalier to express the depth of Jesus’ faith and relationship with God. For ABBA FATHER suggests the deeply personal relationship between loving parent and child, while also preserving the natural and appropriate boundaries between parent and child.
In a commentary on the Lord’s Prayer Al Winn tells a story from ancient Rome that illustrates what ABBA FATHER is all about. The Roman Emperor’s procession was entering Rome when a young child darted in front of the approaching chariot. A member of the Praetorian guard scooped up the lad, scolding the boy “That is the Emperor!” “Your emperor”, responded the boy. “My father” (A Christian Primer 27)

In a culture that had made God ever so distant, so formal, so cold, Jesus injected warmth and a sense of personal relationship with God. As Paul put it in Romans, “When we cry ABBA, FATHER, it is the Spirit itself bearing witness with our witness that we are the children of God.”

And so it is for us when we dare to pray to God OUR Father. Yes, God is the immortal, invisible, God only wise. God is the almighty creator. But God is also a most personal God, ever ready and eager to listen to us, to scoop us up into his bosom, to wrap his arms around us, to love and cherish us and to stand with us as only a mother or a father can do for a child.

To pray to GOD OUR FATHER is to be reminded that the heart of faith is the relationship we have with God. The relationship I have with God, and the relationship you have with God. And as in all fulfilling human relationships, the partners in the God-human relationship love each other, and honor each other, and rejoice with each other and suffer with each other. God is our father and we are God’s children.

I think it is significant that Jesus taught us to pray to God OUR father. Jesus prayed, saying God MY father. But he taught his disciples to pray to OUR father. The personal possessive pronoun denotes how deeply special the faith relationship is. That it is stated in the first person PLURAL form reminds us that God does not belong to any particular ONE of us. God is OUR father. I do not and cannot claim an exclusive relationship with God. I share God with my brothers and sisters in faith, as every child from a multiple child family has to share his or her parents with siblings. To pray to God OUR Father also reminds us that even we who claim to be the children of God and the people of God don’t have an exclusive claim on God: God belongs to ALL of God’s children.

And so we pray, Our Father, WHO ART IN HEAVEN. Luke does not include this phrase. Matthew’s addition of the words “who art in heaven” is consistent with his formal, honorific way of referencing God. To affirm that God is in heaven is also a reality check. After those powerful opening words drawing us into a gentle and loving relationship with God, we find our feet put firmly back on terra firma: Yes, we have a God as close to us a loving parent, but we are NOT GOD. To pray “our Father” speaks of the immediacy, the immanence of God; our Father WHO ART IN HEAVEN speaks of the TRANSCENDENCE of God. God is above us and beyond us. We can never be like God. In the words of our Catechism, our hope is to “glorify God and to enjoy God forever.”

Our Father, who art in heaven, is so very holy, so very good, so very just, so very gracious, so loving, that even God’s very name is to be held in supreme reverence: hallowed by thy name. At this point the prayer takes on a MORAL TONE. We who are not God, we who are not holy, must become more holy if we are to glorify God and fully enjoy God forever. Our God is like a loving, even indulgent parent, but our God does have standards. Our God does have expectations. The faith of Jesus, the faith of the “our Father” prayer, is not an obligation free religion. God is holy, and we cannot find communion with God as long as we reject God’s holiness and our holy calling.

And what does it mean to pray, hallowed be thy name? What does the Lord require of us? The prophet Micah said, the Lord requires us to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. In Luke, just a few verses before he taught his disciples how to pray, Jesus put it this way: to inherit eternal life you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. We hallow God’s name when we hallow what God stands for and what God calls forth in God’s creation.
To pray our Father, who art in heaven, **hallowed be thy name** also punctuates **our need for grace**. For we are NOT holy as God is holy, and we never will be holy as God is holy – apart from the grace of God. As much as God loves us, there is this infinite, gaping chasm between God and humankind. Between God and us. There is a gulf flowing between us that can no more be bridged that we can reach the stars in the heavens. Which brings us back to those first two words of the prayer: OUR FATHER. The great gulf, the great divide between God and us HAS BEEN BRIDGED BY GOD. The gap has been closed by God. The connection is made by God - through the man who teaches us to pray, saying, “Our Father, who art in heaven…” And this connection we call the GRACE OF GOD: God’s merciful love for us that reaches through all that separates us from God. God’s loving presence that brings us into a new and beautiful relationship with God. God’s mighty power that breaks down the walls that separates neighbors and builds up relationships based on love and respect and a common commitment to God’s goodness and justice.

Hallowed be thy name: the prayer reminds us that not all persons hallow the name of God. Not all persons respect the cause of God. And so we who pray this prayer have work to do: to bring an Unholy world into a holy relationship with God and relationships of peace-filled wholeness with one another.


**Romans 8:14-16**

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. **15** For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” **16** it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

**Luke 11:1-4**

1 He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” 2 He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.”