

It's good to be back this Sunday and to begin my 3<sup>rd</sup> year of ministry here at St. Paul's. Since Christmas I've been holding onto an envelope addressed to us listing our city as Corona! Those of you who were here on our first Sunday in July 2016 will remember that when I got the call that I was to be assigned to Coronado, I felt that I might have misheard – that Corona might've been my assignment.

I continue to feel both honored and grateful that our area Bishop has appointed me to be your pastor. For various reasons, the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of ministry can be a tricky one to navigate, and especially as we'll embark later this year on a major fundraising project to eliminate our mortgage debt on the Bandel Building and also for some facility upgrades, especially projects that will improve our sanctuary, sound, light and media. So I'd invite us to be praying for St. Paul's as we embark on some of the ministry initiatives and opportunities before us in the next 12 months.

Just before a week vacation – where I got to visit colleges with our youngest son in the Pacific Northwest – we completed a 5 week sermon series: The Rhythm of Life. That series was important because our ministry team really wants to focus on providing faith formation that is intergenerational. We want to shape our ministry programs in way that bring people together, as much as possible, across the 'lifespan.'

That doesn't mean doing away with age level ministries. It does mean that we'll seek, wherever possible, to do more of our ministries in ways that bridge the generations who call St. Paul's their church 'home.' You know, intergenerational ministry was how Christianity flourished over our first 1800 years. Before that, there was no such thing as age-level 'Sunday School' or youth groups. All ages worshipped, learned, and fellowshiped together. In reality, Sunday School was originally a mission program to provide poor and orphan children an opportunity to learn how to read and write so that they might improve their lives. It happened on Sundays because these indigent or orphan children often had to work in fields and factories during the week!

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Speaking of mission, this morning we're beginning a 4-week series on the theme: *Mission with the Lord's Prayer in Mind*. This series focus is related to something else we're working on throughout this year. A small team, including Tom Lowe, Linda Southard, and Pastor Susan, are reviewing the various mission programs of St. Paul's. Among other things, they're

assessing the extent to which our missions have a meaningful impact upon those being served and upon those who are serving. They're evaluating the extent to which our congregation has broad 'buy-in' to our current missions' opportunities, and they'll be looking to ensure that our missions include a balance of local, regional, national, and international concerns. You'll be hearing more about this as the year progresses.

The Lord's Prayer, or the "Our Father," as it is referred to by some of our Christian brothers and sisters, is both the most famous and the most memorized prayer of the Bible. Just like the Ten Commandments, these are actually two versions of The Lord's Prayer, one in Matthew 6:9-13 and another in Luke 11:2-4. And again, like the Ten Commandments, these two versions of the Lord's Prayer are not identical in content.

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In Matthew's version, which we'll use as the basis for this series, The Lord's Prayer includes an invocation followed by two sets of three petitions. This morning our focus is the invocation, the first line of the prayer, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."

First, an overall observation, Judaism, from its beginnings and up to today, teaches the sanctity and power of God's name. To know the name of something or someone – as *Adam* does in Genesis 2:19-20 – is to exercise a sort of power, even mastery over it. Think of a parent naming their newborn, or how we train children to show respect by teaching them not to use first names when addressing adults.

The Hebrew understanding is that God's name is so holy, so hallowed, that humans should not say it out loud. In ancient biblical manuscripts, God's name is spelled out with four capital letters YHWH, which in English translations is rendered as the word LORD, using four capital letters. So in Psalm 23 for example, we read, "The LORD is my shepherd..." In the Hebrew manuscripts that second word, LORD (with four capital letters), is actually God's name, which scholars guess may have been pronounced YaHWeH. The reason we can't know the pronunciation with any certainty is that ancient Hebrew has no vowels.

All this suggests that when we seek to carry out missions 'in the name of God,' we should do so with the highest expectation that we'd not misrepresent God's holy name. In past eras, Christian missions often fell short in this regard; violating the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment by making wrongful use of God's name in order to manipulate and exploit indigenous

peoples – not to mention in ways that also showed a clear disregard of the teachings of Jesus.

On a lesser scale perhaps, I recall a few years ago when I was with a group on a mission in Mexico. During a break, a few of the adults realized that the cookies we had with us were quite 'aerodynamic.' As pointed out that we might better honor God by giving these cookies to the children in the community for whom food was not a plaything.

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We also need note, secondly, that when Jesus uses this invocation, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name," he does something unique. Jewish prayers of the first century would often begin by addressing God as "Our Father, *our King*." I don't know about you, but for me, the use of the phrase 'our King,' even in prayer, would be another way to show deference to God as holy and sacred.

But in this model prayer, Jesus not only left off the phrase 'our King,' he also used the word 'abba' for father. 'Abba,' as you may know, is an Aramaic word. It's not a Hebrew word; it's Aramaic, which was the common language of Jesus' time. 'Abba' is a child's term of endearment like 'papa' or 'daddy,' and it was also used by adult children when they addressed their fathers.

So, for Jesus, 'father' was not a general term for God, but first of all revealed Jesus' intimate personal relationship with God. And not only that! Jesus includes his disciples as taking part in this intimate relationship because Jesus invites his disciples to address God in exactly this way as he teaches them this prayer! Our Father, *abba*, as Jesus teaches us, is a parent who loves, forgives, and gives good gifts to his children.

And so, while our missional efforts should be done with the expectation that we'd not misrepresent God's holy name, the work of Christian missions should also demonstrate a deep and intimate connection to God. Because we're not only brothers and sisters to each other... we're also brothers and sisters to Jesus – sons and daughters who know how to share the good gifts of our *abba*.

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Thirdly, we really have to take notice of the first word of the prayer, "Our." As I said earlier, in Matthew, the context of The Lord's Prayer is a little different than in Luke. In Luke, Jesus' teaching of this model prayer is prefaced by a request by one of his disciples that Jesus teach them how to pray.

In Matthew, the context doesn't include this request. Rather, in Matthew 6:6, just before he teaches this model prayer, Jesus includes this direction: "...whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret." And yet, despite its context as a prayer to be said in private – while we're alone – Jesus teaches us to address God with words that are plural. From start to finish, Jesus' model prayer uses the words 'our', 'we', and 'us.'

So not only does Jesus render the relationship between God and humanity in more intimate terms by using the word 'abba' for Father, Jesus wants his disciples' prayer life to reflect an understanding that our relationship with God connects us in kinship to our Christian family throughout the world. The plural 'our' pronoun does not imply that God is somehow 'our' special possession, but rather emphasizes the interdependence the apostle Paul talks about in passages like Galatians 4:28, where he uses an image of the church as a unified body, regardless of race, status, gender, etc.

But does Jesus' invitation to address God using the plural 'Our Father' propel us further – to include those who are not, and perhaps never be, card-carrying members of the Christian tribe? Karl Barth, a famous theologian of the mid-1900's, responded to that question affirmatively, writing: "Those who are brought together by Jesus Christ are also in communion with those who do not yet pray, perhaps, ***but for whom Jesus Christ prays*** since he prays for [humankind] as a whole."

IN this regard doing missions in the name of God requires a generous posture and spirit towards those who are seeking to serve, knowing that just as Jesus entered into solidarity with us when we are far off, we too offer our service because we trust in the One who first reached out to serve us.

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"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." This invocation reminds us that our missions efforts need to first, honor God's holy name; second, reflect intimacy with our loving *Abba*, and third demonstrates our sense of kinship with those both inside and outside the community of faith. Amen.