

## A New Righteousness: The Heart of the Matter

This is the final Sunday in our prolonged season of Epiphany this year. On Wednesday, many Christians will begin the season of Lent with the reminder that we are dust and will return to dust with the imposition of ashes to their foreheads. I have found this extra-long Epiphany to be a blessing this year as it has allowed us to spend time in Matthew's relating of the Sermon on the Mount. We cannot be sure whether this is Matthew's careful notation of a sermon that Jesus preached on a particular day or if it is a compilation of key points which Jesus undoubtedly used many times in his teaching but as Matthew records these words in chapters 5 through 7 of his telling of the Good News, they serve as a wonderful distillation of the whole of Jesus' message.

We will leave the Sermon on the Mount at a little past its mid-point. We will wait until another time to take up chapter 7 and, indeed, the tradition of most of the Church would have us leave our current reading for another time to tell the story of the Transfiguration on the last Sunday of Epiphany. But I think the passage that I've chosen for this morning actually relates the same truths about Jesus and his way that the story of the Transfiguration does in such a memorable and visual manner. The epiphany or revelation of Jesus as a divine figure upon another mountain in the company of Moses and Elijah gives us a vision of the man from Nazareth lit from within, as it were, glowing with the presence of God and supported by the primary representatives of the Law and the Prophets. In the Sermon on the Mount, we find Jesus' words, which we understand as also being inhabited by the wisdom of God, and in this passage in particular he is giving us a new understanding, a fulfillment, of what his contemporaries saw as the keys to living out the life of righteousness revealed in the Law and the Prophets: the giving of alms, regular prayer to God, and fasting.

Time precludes an exhaustive exegesis of all 18 verses of this passage and in many respects Jesus' teaching here is fairly self-evident. He upholds the honored practices of charity, prayer and self-denial but warns those who hear his words not to allow their pursuit of righteousness to become instead a seeking after praise from their fellows. These are not, I think, lessons we need to belabor at Good Shepherd Baptist Church. There is a determined practice of confidentiality surrounding the giving of tithes and offerings in this place, with some of us opting to have our gifts delivered automatically to the church by check or to the church's bank account electronically rather than running the risk of anyone knowing what we drop in the plate. Clearly, nobody here is having trumpets blown as they render unto God that which is God's. Nor is anyone, with the possible exception of your pastor, given to long-windedness or ostentation in prayer. For most, I suspect, the hardest part of being host family is standing up to pray out loud. And, if anybody here is fasting as a part of their spiritual discipline, I certainly don't know about it. So, I think it's fair to say that we've got that part of this passage covered.

Instead, I want to focus this morning on the prayer which Jesus taught on the hill that day. Luke also records these words but in a different context – Jesus' disciples ask him to teach them to pray. Here in Matthew, however, what we call The Lord's Prayer sits at the very center of the Sermon on the Mount. In a few brief words, it reflects both what comes before it in the sermon and what comes after. If, as I have been proposing, the Sermon on the Mount is the summation of Jesus' earthly teaching, then the Lord's Prayer is the summation of the Sermon on the Mount. It is, you might say, the heart of the matter.

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I am indebted for this idea to my former professor and friend, Glen Stassen, formerly of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and now of Fuller Seminary, and his book, Living the Sermon on the Mount. I have reproduced a chart from Glen's excellent book on your bulletin insert and I will refer to it from time to time but I will not cover all of its points and so I invite you to explore this idea on your own or by picking up a copy of Glen's book for your own. It's reasonably priced through Amazon.

Dr. Stassen links the first sentence of the prayer to the first two verses in the sermon with a comparison between Jesus and Moses. Like Moses, he says, Jesus brought the word of God for the people from or on a mountain. And like Moses, he says, Jesus experienced and taught the reality of God as a compassionate savior. Insofar as we experience God as the one who rescues us from sin, death and brokenness, as God rescued the Israelites from Egypt, we experience God as Father. God also shows God's holiness or hallowedness in that act of salvation for at the center of God's holy character is love.

There are, of course, many other ideas here worth considering. To begin with, there is Jesus' teaching that we should call on God as our Father. There are passages in the Old Testament that use the metaphor of parenthood for God. God refers to Israel as God's child and both maternal and paternal images of God occur but at no point does any Old Testament writer suggest that we should call God "Father." God is the Lord, the Almighty, God of Heaven and the Heavenly Host, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and so on. But now Jesus says, "Pray in this way: Our Father..." And the word that Jesus uses is not a formal word. It is the word still taught to tiny babies in the Middle East, where Aramaic has not been spoken for thousands of years: Abba. The equivalents in our English and Euro cultures would be Dada or Papa. It is the word used by the little child who knows nothing but trust for their parents and nothing but love from them. As we grow, our relationships with our parents become more complicated, perhaps even adversarial, but Jesus calls on us to reach into our most basic memories and understanding of life when we call on the Creator of All as our Loving Parent: Papa, Dada, Abba. And let us not forget that Jesus taught us to say "Our Abba," not "My Abba." There is a strong reminder throughout this prayer at the heart of the matter that we live in community. We will come back to this idea in a few minutes.

"Our Father in heaven..." I have recently finished reading the book Simply Christian by N.T. Wright, the former Anglican Bishop of Durham (in the Northeast of England) and one of the foremost New Testament scholars of our day. It is another book, by the way, that I highly recommend – the equivalent of C.S. Lewis' Mere Christianity for our day. Wright points out several times in the book that the concept of Heaven in the Bible was never meant as a literal reference to the sky but instead as a type of shorthand meaning "the place where God is" as opposed to earth, "the place where we are." Wright goes on to remind the reader that the Bible contains many stories of God's presence becoming known in human lives, where earth and heaven meet, in other words. The most profound of these happenings, of course, is in the Incarnation, the Christ-event, when God came down in the person of the Son and "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." When Jesus taught us to pray to our Father in heaven, he didn't mean that we had to mentally send our prayers far beyond the stars. Instead, we are to remember that Heaven touches Earth whenever we pursue the presence and righteousness of

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God. Heaven, the Kingdom of God, is within us or among us, according to your favored translation of Jesus' words.

"...hallowed be thy name." Literally, we are praying for God to make God's name holy. Seems a little silly, doesn't it. Isn't God's name holy by definition? Remember, in the ancient world, including the time of Jesus, a name was not just a word but something revelatory of the person to whom it was attached. We may not think much about this these days, but we are still careful to give our children names that we think will reflect well on them in years to come. Nobody names their kid Adolf or Benedict or Judas these days, yet in their time these names were quite popular. It only took one person of abominable character to remove those names from the realm of use. In his book, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Kenneth E. Bailey reminds us that God's people can and have brought shame on the name of God by identifying themselves with God and then acting in very un-God-like ways. We certainly all know people who have a terrible opinion of Christians because of the acts of some who self-identify as followers of Jesus. And don't the actions of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church make it hard to want to proclaim ourselves as Baptists? But you don't have to be as notorious as Fred Phelps to cause God's name to be dishonored. There's the famous story of the impatient motorist who cut off another driver, then honked, shook his fist and flashed the finger at his victim. Upon being pulled over by a cop after this display of bad manners, he asked "why?" Said the officer, "I saw what you did and then I noticed the fish insignia on your trunk and the bumper stickers that said, "Honk if you Love Jesus," and "Ask me about First Baptist Church," and I thought you must have stolen the car." When we pray for God to hallow God's holy name, we are also praying that God keep us from causing that name to be dishonored.

One of the great paradoxes of our faith is our understanding that the Kingdom of God is both here and not-yet. On the one hand, Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God, the state of being in which God's will is followed, is within us, among us, wherever he is present. On the other hand, he taught us to continue to pray for the fulfillment of the Kingdom — that God's will should be done in the realm of humankind just as it is done in the realm of God. As Christians, we recognize the beginning of God's Kingdom on earth, the Beloved Community we sometimes call it, in the Incarnation and in the Resurrection. But we cannot help but be aware that the redeeming work of God has not yet played out in full. Death and sin are all around us. "The Creation groans," as Paul wrote to the Romans, as do we as we wait for the process of our adoption to be completed. When we consider the victims of war and human evil or of the natural forces still not tamed in the ongoing process of creation, we pray, "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done," and we do our best by following the teachings of Jesus that come before this prayer to live in a way that shows we are already part of the Kingdom, performing the will of God in our lives.

As we live out our calling as part of the Beloved Community already assembled, we give of what we have to others and we ask God to continue to make us able to do so. "Give us this day our daily bread," is not, you will notice, a prayer about *my* welfare but about *our* welfare, the commonweal. It is a prayer to have enough; a prayer for bread, not cake. It is a prayer, as Kenneth Bailey writes, for deliverance from fear of famine; not only that we shall have enough for today but for every day to come. This prayer is important to a vast number of the people of earth, even in our own country, who live in a state of what social scientists call "food insecurity."

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Those of us who are well-fed and secure need to remember this. We may spiritualize this plea into “give us a little more understanding of you and your Word, today, O God,” and that is fine. But we must remember that people are starving and while that is so, they do not have the luxury of hungering and thirsting after righteousness. George Bernard Shaw understood this even if he thought religion was bunk. In “Major Barbara,” the character Undershaft challenges his Salvation Army-leader daughter: “It is cheap work converting starving men with a Bible in one hand and a slice of bread in the other... Try your hand on (these) men: their souls are hungry because their bodies are full.” We must pray and work for daily bread for all; even as we remember that all good things come to us as a gift from God.

We are also reminded of our place in the community as we ask God to forgive us as we also forgive. We are to be a part of breaking the cycle of vengeful violence, loving not just our neighbors who treat us well but also those whom we might call enemies. We are not to seek seventy-seven fold revenge, as did Cain’s wicked descendent Lamech, but to be ready to forgive our sister or brother seventy-seven times, as Jesus told Peter. Glen Stassen lists four steps in the process of forgiveness. First, we must acknowledge that we have been wronged. The healing of forgiveness cannot occur if we pretend nothing is wrong. Second, we must be willing to break the cycle of revenge. Third, we must recognize that we, too, have hurt others and so share this very human flaw with the one who hurt us, even though the action and pain may be different. Later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called it taking the plank out of our own eyes. Finally, we must be willing to have a restored relationship with the one who hurt us. This may not be possible if the threat of continued violence exists – we are not called to some kind of “holy masochism” in which we allow ourselves to be continually abused – but we must be ready for a new relationship with one who has turned away from hurting us. Dr. Stassen writes, “We recognize that we are sinners ourselves, and therefore we share at least that much with the guilty person.”

When we pray this prayer together, we still say the words most of us were taught as children from the old King James Version of the Bible: “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” The New Revised Version I read earlier says, “And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.” I find it easy to understand the NRSV idea of God bringing us to the time of trial. The Bible gives us plenty of stories of God putting people to the test – Job, for example, or Abraham with the sacrifice of Isaac. I can pray with great fervency to not be put to those sorts of tests. But the idea of God leading us into temptations has never made much sense to me. One of the great New Testament scholars of the last century, Joachim Jeremias, did a great deal of work on the Aramaic underlying the existing Greek manuscripts of this prayer, some of which is quoted in Bailey’s book. Jeremias points out that “do not cause us to go into temptation” in Aramaic can also be translated, “do not permit us to go into temptation.” In other words, “Dear God, keep me from doing anything stupid today.” Now, I know that prayer. It’s one I often say myself. And the picture of our loving Abba gently steering us away from toddling up to the hot surface and burning our chubby little hands makes good sense to me. I remember my Dad doing just that for me – or at least I remember being told about it. “God, keep us away from things that draw us away from you.” You might say that the prayer ends as it begins, with a child’s understanding that we need our Loving Creator, our Mama, our Daddy, to protect us from the dangers that still lurk in God’s unfinished world.

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In Simply Christian, N.T. Wright points out that Jesus did more than teach this prayer. He lived it. Jesus honored his Father's name and taught others to do the same. In Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven came to earth and God's will was fully done in the life of a human being for the first time. Jesus fed people and forgave sinners. But when he asked to be released from the time of trial, he realized that to complete his God-given mission he would have to undergo the ultimate test. And Jesus, assailed by the forces of the evil one, stayed true to death and beyond. As we share today's bread and drink together from the fruit of the vine, we remember that he faced the trial and defeated forever the forces of evil. And as we pray this prayer together, we are saying to God, "We want to live like Jesus did. We want to experience you as Abba. We want to bring honor to your name by our deeds and our words. We want to do your will, Loving Creator, and to help bring life and health and forgiveness in our community. We recognize, Abba, that in you and in the work of Jesus, we have been saved from evil and temptation. Help us never to forget." For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.