
Pater Noster
Martin Grove United Church
July 28, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 11:1-13

The Lord's Prayer is perhaps the best known prayer in all of Christianity. Very few worship services do not include the Lord's Prayer - at least in some form. It's included as a part of virtually every Christian funeral service. Here at Martin Grove United Church we include it in our prayers every week. Now, I'm hoping that someone will disagree with me on that point. No?

Here at Martin Grove, we are currently cycling through different versions of the Lord's Prayer. Every 2 weeks we use the version that I imagine most of you grew up with. And the other weeks we alternate between two other versions: One is a paraphrase that attempts to relate the ideas in the Lord's Prayer to our modern reality, and the other is taken directly from the Bible, but not the King James that you know in your hearts. And that's why I hope that some of you disagree with me when I say we use the Lord's Prayer every week. Because for some of you, perhaps you think we only get the Lord's Prayer half the time. And that's not a criticism of anyone. It's just a reflection that we use the Lord's prayer in different ways.

One way that the prayer is used is to meditate on the words, and the sounds of the words. Many medieval Christian meditative practices revolve around using the words to the Lord's Prayer as a focus for meditation. Another way to use the Lord's Prayer is to reflect on the meaning of the words themselves, perhaps feeling a real invitation into forgiveness, perhaps reflecting on basic human needs, like bread, or perhaps seeing the Lord's Prayer as a model for your own prayers and adapting it to suit your own mood and situation. But I believe that the third way to use the Lord's Prayer is in fact the most common, which is to simply use it as a liturgical piece. By using it as liturgy I mean that we attach great value to the fact that we recite the prayer that is not directly related to the meaning of the prayer itself. Using the Lord's Prayer as liturgy during worship reminds us of our past, reminds us that we are one, reminds us that there are pieces within

Christian worship that transcend time and space. It reminds us that we are part of something larger.

If you bristle every time we use words to the Lord's Prayer that are not the old tried and true, perhaps it's simply because you deeply appreciate this liturgical aspect of the prayer. And there is nothing wrong with that. Using the Lord's Prayer liturgically, like it's a "set piece" also make us resist alternate versions of the prayer. The liturgical use of the Lord's Prayer is a lot like how Canadians sing our National Anthem. There are people who are delighted when Canada updates the words in O Canada to more closely match the image of Canada that we hold in our hearts. And there are also people - liturgical people - who think that the words should never change.

Many people like the Lord's Prayer, but want to grapple with the words as a way of making the prayer more powerful today. Consider this version:

Dear One, closer to us than our own hearts, farther from us than the most distant star, you are beyond naming. May your powerful presence become obvious not only in the undeniable glory of the sky, but also in the seemingly base and common processes of the earth. Give us what we need, day by day, to keep body and soul together, because clever as you have made us, we still owe our existence to you. We recognize that to be reconciled with you, we must live peaceably and justly with other human beings, putting hate and bitterness behind us. We are torn between our faith in your goodness and our awareness of the evil in your creation, so deliver us from the temptation to despair. Yours alone is the universe and all its majesty and beauty.

The whole reason we use different versions at all is because different versions speak to our different needs and speak to different people. Here at Martin Grove we respect people who like the liturgical aspect of the Lord's prayer. We also respect people who want to meditate on the meaning of the words and those who want to think and be challenged by the words. We are all in this together.

The introduction "Our father, who art in heaven", or more simply, "Our father in heaven" was probably meant as a simple opening - who are we talking to here anyway?

But perhaps even the opening isn't so simple. The ancient theologian Augustine understood "heaven" to mean in the hearts of faithful people, not a reference to a place at all. And in our modern world, God does not have an expressed gender. But to bring this into the present - what words would you pick to open a prayer with? Perhaps you are comfortable with the words "Our Father", but many people have their own expressions. Our mother, spirit, spirit of love, God of love, and many others. What language would you naturally use to open this (or any) prayer?

First part: "Hallowed by thy name". What does that mean? Literally, it means that we should treat God's name as holy. I have never liked the word "hallowed". For one thing, "Hallowed" is a strange word, and every time I hear it I think of Halloween. Plus I don't really understand why we want to label God's name as holy. I'm fine with the idea that God is holy, but a name is just a label. I mean - what if you die and go to heaven and discover that God's actual name is Veronica - would that make a difference? What language would you naturally use in place of these words?

Second part: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, in earth, as it is in heaven". There is a lot of talk in the New Testament about the coming kingdom of God. This is that kingdom that is coming and yet already is. Notice, this is a call to bring a kingdom that is already established to earth. It is not a call for us to go to heaven. John Ortberg puts it this way, "Many people think our job is to get my afterlife destination taken care of, then tread water till we all get ejected and God comes back and torches the place. But Jesus never told anybody to pray 'Get me out of here'."¹ There is another interesting tension here too. Some Christians believe that we are only required to wait and ask God to bring the kingdom to earth, and others believe that we are required to work to create that kingdom ourselves. I figure if we have to wait, we may as well keep busy. I don't see any reason to NOT work to create the kingdom here and now even if God will ultimately bring it. Like the bumper sticker says, "Jesus is coming. Look busy"

Third part: "give us this day our daily bread". Finally - a simple one. But wait a minute, what does it mean? When we say "bread" do we mean food, or since Jesus is the bread of life, does "daily bread" actually refer to our daily engagement with Jesus? And if

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord%27s_Prayer

bread does mean food, does it really mean all requirement for daily living, water, a job, fair wages, etc? And what does “give” mean? How many of us sit at home waiting for God to give us food as if God delivers pizza. Does the word “give” really mean give us the opportunity to work and buy our own food at a store. Is the demand “give us this day our daily bread” satisfied by having a local food bank, or does it require that we have good employment, a living wage, and a safe work environment? What words would you use here to express what you feel about the requirements of daily living?

Fourth part: “And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us”. I remember as a kid thinking if the neighbour would just put up a fence I wouldn’t trespass in the first place. Problem solved. But we know that trespass isn’t about property violations. Trespass is sometimes translated as sin, or debt. Perhaps someone older than I am can clarify this for me later, but I have always thought of trespass in the sense that I might trespass on someone’s hospitality by doing something that fell outside of established social norms. Like overstaying your welcome, or taking more than your share of the cake. So is it a trespass if I do something inappropriate? What if I fail to do something appropriate? Is it also a trespass if I have an opportunity to be nice to someone and I simply choose to not do it because I don’t feel like it? What words would you use here to express what you feel here about what justice should look like?

Fifth part: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”. Does God lead people into temptation? And if so, would God not do it because we asked God not to? You will not be surprised that this line has caused lots of debate - and perhaps even downright panic - within the church over the years. There is a long held belief that God - being loving - would not cause people to be tempted. So what does this line mean? You may recall that in 2018 the Pope changed the English translation to read “do not let us fall into temptation” because of the belief that a loving God would not tempt us or allow us to be tempted.

But actually, the Bible says otherwise. In the Bible, God does lead people into temptation. One example is that after Jesus was baptized, ... here - I’ll read it from Luke 4 - “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil”. Also, in the book of

Job, God and the devil engage in gambling, and God authorizes the devil to destroy Job's life in order to tempt Job to turn his back on God. The book of Job is understood to be a short story, not actual history, but in any case, the image of God that is imagined is a God who deliberately tempted a faithful person. And we have the classic story - where God allegedly tempted Abraham by forcing him to choose between faithfulness to God and the life of his son. In the Bible, God has no problem tempting people, or allowing the devil to tempt people which is even worse. But I agree with the Pope by the way. I prefer wording that is more consistent with how we view God today, and I agree that a loving God would not tempt their children. We have enough problems already.

The word "evil" is somewhat ambiguous in the Greek. The Greek word used for evil in this text could be either masculine or neuter. If the word is neuter, it refers to evil in a general sense. If the word is masculine, it refers to the devil. I'm not sure there is a practical difference between those two views in any case. But what does "deliver us from evil" mean? Does it mean protecting us from others? Does it include protecting us from ourselves when we exhibit self-destructive behaviour? "Deliver us from evil" would seem to violate free will. Perhaps it's really a call for us to more quickly figure out the ways that we ourselves are self-destructive and the strength to stop doing those things. What words would you use here?

And finally, the doxology: "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory. For ever and ever. Amen." The doxology really is a liturgical piece. It is a statement of praise.

I invite each of us this week to reflect on the Lord's Prayer - using any version you like, and I invite you to do 3 things:

1. Pick a phrase or sentence that draws you in.
2. Imagine other words that speak more directly to your experiences of faith, life, and love.
3. Come next week and be prepared to share your ideas with everyone.

Amen.