

# “The Greatest Prayer” by Julie R. Harley

Matthew 6:9-15 – Nov. 6, 2011 – First United Church of Oak Park

Today’s text is the Lord’s Prayer, which theologian John Dominic Crossan calls “the greatest prayer.” Why is it the greatest prayer?

Because we can pray it by heart. Because it is a hymn of hope for the whole world.

Look at the poetic structure, which makes it easy to memorize:

*Our Father, who art in heaven,* (the opening address, followed by three petitions about God)

1. *Hallowed be thy name.*

2. *Thy kingdom come,*

3. *Thy will be done,*

*On earth as it is in heaven.* (transition, to shift focus to three petitions about people)

1. *Give us this day our daily bread,*

2. *And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*

3. *Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,*

*For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.* (closing statement of faith)

Now let’s look at each part more closely.

## **Our Father, who art in heaven . . .**

*Have you ever had a celebrity sighting?* One of our church members told me about the day she met Barack Obama. He was running for office, and she attended a fundraiser here in Oak Park. Obama was already a rising star on the national scene, and he had done his homework. He called this woman by name and personally thanked her for her contributions to justice issues in our community.

It’s a stunning experience to meet someone who has power, fame and fortune – and actually knows us **personally**. . . . Now I’m not trying to compare Barack Obama with God, but when we address God in the Lord’s Prayer, we have the amazing experience of speaking to the Holy One who gives life to every living thing, and yet also knows us personally.

God has two natures. God is both intimate (using the metaphor of parent – “our Father”) and distant (“who art in heaven”).

## **God is at the same time all-loving and all-powerful.**

Those two ways of experiencing God are like two sides of a coin – they are inseparable, but we tend to see only one side at a time.

When we pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven,” we express both aspects of God in a single phrase . . . it is beautiful to realize that the God who is as close as our own breath and as distant as the farthest star – is connecting with us right now.

**Pay attention to the first word of the prayer, which is “our.”** We begin this prayer together, as a community of faith. This is not an individual prayer for God’s help – it is much more powerful than that, because we pray it TOGETHER.

**Notice that in the Lord’s Prayer there is no mention of the words I, Me or My.** We say, “OUR Father . . . OUR daily bread . . . OUR debts . . . Lead US.” In the early church, believers went through three years of training and preparation before they were entrusted to speak the powerful words of this sacred prayer. This is a hymn of hope for the whole world.

When we say this prayer together as part of our communion liturgy today, allow it to invade the depths of your being, to infuse you with the presence of God, and to prepare you to become the body of Christ in this place. **The Lord's Prayer calls us to care about more than feeding our own families: it calls us to feed every member of God's family.**

Many people get hung up on the second word in the Lord's Prayer, when we call God "Father" – either positively as the only way we can refer to God or negatively as a cosmic example of gender-exclusive language. So how should we understand that title for God?

In the original language, the word is "Abba," literally translated as "daddy." All of our language for God is metaphorical, and this metaphor describes God as a protector or provider, one who ensures that everyone in the household has enough. In Mideast culture 2,000 years ago, that person was usually the father.

To translate this word into a modern context, we could use the phrase "head of household" or "householder." Only in this case, God's household is not limited to four walls, but embraces the whole earth.

When God prepares a feast, **everyone** is invited to the table. There are no exclusive invitations. This is the only table I know where everyone is served the same bread, the same cup, where everyone is welcome. The Lord's supper is radically inclusive. Communion is God's demonstration of extravagant generosity!

In the next part of the Lord's Prayer, we pray three petitions for God's victory:

1. **Hallowed be thy name:** We pray, God -- show the world who you are!

We will uphold your reputation as a God of justice and righteousness.

God's name is holy because God practices a distinctive kind of justice – distributive justice, rather than retributive justice. Earthly kings and leaders often use their power to gain control over their enemies. But God uses power to make sure there is a level playing field for all people – giving a preferential option to the poor and the disadvantaged.

That's why we make space in our church for people who are homeless on Monday nights, for people who are hungry on Wednesdays and Saturdays, for people who need clothing, for people who need jobs and tutoring and other forms of assistance.

We lift up God's name when we redistribute wealth from the haves to the have-nots, so that there will be abundance for all and scarcity for none.

2. **Thy kingdom come:** In a tribal society, power is held by rulers who control people through military strength. When we pray for God's kingdom to come to earth, we ask for a different style of rule, a different kind of power.

The word "kingdom" is often translated in patriarchal terms, but the original Greek is "basileia," which means the reign or realm of God. Bryan Sirchio, who led worship here last month, suggests you can think of the realm of God as "God's dream."

In the realm of God, we are all equal citizens. There are no "strangers" here, because outsiders are welcomed as insiders. In God's realm, we are all responsible for the welfare of one another.

This is why we are one of many churches who have declared we are an "immigrant welcoming congregation." When God truly reigns, we do not check people's documents before deciding whether they deserve our respect. In God's realm, we welcome the stranger, knowing

that outsiders do not have the protection of family and kinship ties given to those who are insiders.

3. **Thy will be done:** We pray, God - may your reign of peace and justice come to earth.

This week our world population exceeded 7 billion. The Earth's population has doubled in my lifetime. Of those 7 billion souls, 3 billion of our sisters and brothers are living on less than \$2 a day. The World Bank estimates that 925 million people in our world will go to bed hungry tonight . . . if they have a bed.

We can be grateful that we will eat today, and take seriously the words of the Lord's Prayer. If God's will is done on earth, no one should have to go to sleep hungry tonight.

**On earth as it is in heaven:** We pray for a world where God is in control – where earth looks a lot more like heaven.

We continue the Lord's Prayer with three petitions for our own hungers.

1. **We begin by praying for food: Give us this day our daily bread.**

These words remind us of the story of God giving manna to the Israelites during the Exodus – every person got the same amount (about half a quart), just enough for one day at a time. When people tried to store extra manna for themselves, it would rot overnight.

"Give us this day our daily bread" makes it clear that 1 percent of the population should not control 35 percent of the wealth in the United States. "Give us this day our daily bread" makes it clear that it is immoral for the top 10 percent of the population to own 71 percent of the wealth, and it is even more sinful to realize that the bottom 40 percent of wage earners in our country own less than half of 1 percent of all wealth. (Data from the Federal Reserve Board)

God's economy could be called "enough-ism." God wants all of us to have enough for today, with the assurance of the same for tomorrow and every day to come.

2. **We continue the Lord's Prayer by praying for grace: And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.** Why do some congregations use the word "debts" in the Lord's Prayer, while others use "trespasses" and still others use the word "sins"?

For one thing, the Lord's Prayer is found in different forms in Matthew, Mark and Luke. The gospel of Mark uses the word "trespasses." The gospel of Luke uses the words "sins" and "debts" – *Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.* (Luke 11:4)

The gospel of Matthew uses "debts" twice in today's text, but then switches to "trespasses" in verses 14 and 15, and then "sins" in chapter 18, and finally back to debts again in 18:23. Sometimes this word refers to financial debts, sometimes to religious sins, and other times to trespasses against God's will or religious teaching. You could say that all three versions of the Lord's Prayer (using debts, trespasses or sins) are biblical.

Jesus makes a strong connection between financial debts and sin, because when debt creates too much inequality, it becomes sinful.

We know this from recent debt problems: bank failures; the housing mortgage collapse; the national debt ceiling crisis; and the huge student loans that burden many college graduates.

This same inequity existed in Jesus' day, when poor people were often dragged into court and sued for their clothing in order to re-pay their debts to the wealthy. As a Jew, Jesus

lived according to the law of Hebrew scripture, which dictated that every seven days – all people (slaves and owners) were entitled to equal rest on the Sabbath. Every seven years, debts were forgiven. Every 50 years in the Jubilee Year, all land was returned to its original owner and all slaves were set free.

It's fascinating to learn that in Mosaic law, loans were not made to earn a profit or exploit a commercial opportunity: loans were only made to avert disaster. Debts were seen as a result of misfortune, so lenders were expected to cancel debts periodically in the interest of justice. These religious laws are a way of re-distributing wealth and balancing inequality of power.

Canceling a financial debt or forgiving a long-held grudge both have the same effect: we are set free to live a more abundant life.

### **3. We complete the Lord's Prayer with our hunger for peace: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

We know there is evil in this world. Just a few miles from here, just a few days ago, a 14-year-old girl named Kelli O'Laughlin was stabbed to death in a burglary attempt in her home. Just a few miles from here, on any given day in any given week, children and young adults and senior citizens are killed as accidental victims of gang violence.

Our temptation is to respond to evil with escalating violence.

The challenge of Christian faith is to respond to evil with nonviolent love.

A friend of mine who lives in the Lyons Township school district said she and hundreds of other community residents stood on both sides of the street as the funeral procession drove Kelli's casket from the funeral home to the church where funeral was held. By their compassionate witness to this young girl's family, they were praying, "Deliver us from evil."

In the streets of Chicago, former gang members formed an organization called Cease Fire. They train their members to be violence interrupters, intervening in neighborhoods where there is a fight or where someone has been shot or killed. By their courageous presence, they are praying, "Deliver us from evil."

This petition is what we whisper as we leave the sanctuary and go out into the world: *God, keep us safe out there. Help us answer evil with love.*

The Lord's Prayer concludes with a faith statement that most scholars believe was added many years after Jesus' teaching: **For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever.**

Jesus taught us to pray the Lord's prayer when we don't know how to pray. It is a powerful prayer of hope.

But prayer is not about changing God. It's about changing us.

**The Lord's Prayer stirs us to act so that all people will have their daily bread**, so that this world becomes more like God's dream. This morning you have a chance to put that prayer into action – to pray and to do justice.

On this Hunger Sunday, our Faith in Action committee invites you to make a difference for hungry people **locally, regionally and globally** by taking three simple actions:

1. Take a tour of our OPRF Food Pantry on the lower level of the church. The Food Pantry will have to reduce its service area by one-third on Jan. 1<sup>st</sup>, because of a 50% reduction in USDA support overall and a 25% increase in food costs from the

Greater Chicago Food Depository. The pantry needs our support – as volunteers and as donors – in the work of giving people their daily bread.

2. You will find white postcards in the pews today, and they ask Gov. Pat Quinn to attend the Community Renewal Society Martin Luther King Jr. Day Assembly, which will be held next January at Kingdom Baptist Church in Austin. We ask you sign those postcards and put them in the offering or give them to a volunteer on the way out today. The Community Renewal Society is one of the mission partners that we support in our work of advocacy on behalf of those 40 percent of Americans who own less than 1 percent of our nation's wealth.
3. We ask you to write letters to our legislators as part of our Bread for the World Offering of Letters today to provide emergency food assistance to 12 million people who are starving in the Horn of Africa: Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia. Though international aid is less than 1 percent of our federal budget, it is a lifeline for hungry people in the world's poorest countries.

The Greatest Prayer inspires us to build a world where everyone has enough food for today, and no debt for tomorrow, and no human violence ever. Amen.

*To go deeper, read "The Greatest Prayer" by John Dominic Crossan.*