

Text: Psalm 33.1-15

March 10th, 2019 (1st Sun in Lent)

*“Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.”*

SOMEONE TO LOOK OVER US

--So, you think you know the Lord's Prayer?

I don't mean: Do you know it well enough to recite it? There's no doubt about that. Since we say it all the time--every week as part of our liturgy, often at the conclusion of one of our Committee meetings--we are no doubt very well acquainted with it. Why, we can practically say it in our sleep.

And that's our starting problem. Heaven knows, we are perfectly able to recite it without really thinking about a single word that we're saying. We are totally capable of mechanically rattling through its phrases while actually our minds are, say, thinking about which restaurant we'll go to today for dinner.

So, in asking if we think that we know the Lord's Prayer, I mean: Do we know it well enough to understand it, really? Do we know it well enough to grasp consciously what we are affirming, what we are petitioning God to do?

That's a bigger question. And it is the one that underlies the sum of our considerations for all of the Sundays in Lent, beginning this morning.

--In announcing that, you've got to know that this hasn't been my choice. Oh, I knew for weeks that Lent was approaching and that I'd have to come up with something soon. But it wasn't until, a week or so ago, I woke up one morning with the unsolicited thought that the focus was to be on the Lord's Prayer. Where'd that come from?

Frankly, this is not the direction that I had been considering, nor is it where I'd choose to go, because there are some things buried in that innocuous-sounding prayer that we would just as soon not hear, and that I--coward that I am--would just as soon not have to deal with in this setting. But, at that moment of waking, it was given to me clearly, so the Lord's Prayer it is to be! Who am I to push back against the authority of that?

You realize, of course, that if I do this series of messages--each directly related to what has gone before and what is coming next--it obligates you to be here every Sunday to get the whole enchilada. None of this skipping every other Sunday stuff, right? That just won't do, if we are to deal with this beloved old prayer in its entirety.

--All that said, you know how the prayer begins: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." This morning, we shall focus on only that line.

In terms of our start, it needs to be mentioned first that the Lord's Prayer that we recite on Sunday mornings is a more polished and elaborated version of what originally appears at two different places in our four gospels. You may not know that. The shorter of the two versions in the Bible appears in Luke's narrative (11.2-4), the more developed of the two in Matthew (6.9-13). As we go along here, week by week, we shall note how these gospels read, compared to what we commonly recite.

Regarding this opening line, Luke reads simply, "Father, hallowed be your name" (11.2ba); Matthew reads,

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” (6.9).

In any case, it is a confession, really, that in the Divine-human relationship, in the Creator-creature relationship, we are not talking here about co-equals. It is a declared acknowledgement of that fundamental inequality.

If God is “Father,” then that makes us only children. The “Father” and children are never on the same level. The “Father” is higher than the children, superior to them in every way. So, it is declared, God is “in heaven,” looking down from on high to see what the children are up to at the moment. (And we’re always up to something!)

“The Lord looks down from heaven,” writes the Psalmist. “He sees all humankind. From where he sits enthroned, he watches all the inhabitants of the earth . . . and observes all their deeds” (33.13-15).

This envisioned loftiness, this high-ness, is the expression of God’s utter transcendence, of God’s being radically different from everything else in creation. That is the very definition of holiness--i.e., being wholly other--and it qualifies God’s name, as the prayer puts it, as being “hallowed,” sacred, cherished, venerated.

God’s name is the name above all names, of such importance, in fact, that in the most pious observances the name is never written, never spoken out loud. To give voice to, to put into a word, the name of God would be to show great disrespect to the Divine. It would reflect a sort of recklessness, to think that the Infinite can somehow be caught and reduced to sounds or letters.

--You may be asking yourself about now: If this is not just to be only intellectually stimulating and otherwise personally irrelevant, is there a bottom line here, where we are concerned?

Perhaps it is to be found here: Though we know to expect a certain warmth and friendliness on the part of this Divinity, we are to understand that the God of the Lord’s Prayer is not a buddy, not a chum, not a pal. God is Being beyond any conceivable description--fathomless Depth, borderless Breadth. We are in relationship with something vast and of unimaginable magnitude. Perhaps the closest we can come to approaching the nature of this God is losing ourselves in those extraordinary pictures taken in space by the Hubble Telescope, truly jaw-dropping snapshots of the measureless universe of which a puny earth is a part.

And the most staggering thought of all is that this great Someone who is present to all those galaxies, swirling out in every direction, is also inexhaustibly interested and invested in you and me. It beats me as to why.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name.”

Maker of all, Source of our own lives, Presence throughout the heavens, You are Holiness itself. Before You, we can only stand speechless. And You love us. You love us.

The Psalmist in this morning’s reading puts it thus: “The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord” (33.5b).

Truly, awesome! Awesome!

(Oh, see you next week!)