

WHAT THE LORD'S PRAYER MEANS TO ME

When Mark sent out the email to those of us at St. Francis asking if anyone would be willing to speak about what the Lord's Prayer or the Apostle's Creed meant to us, I thought to myself, "I'm not going to touch either of the Creeds with a 10-foot pole!"

Our wonderful former Assistant Priest at St. Francis, Molly McGreevy, acknowledging the difficulty the Creeds presented for many of her parishioners, used to say: *"I think of the Creed as if they were written on double-spaced paper, so that when we recite them in the liturgy I can mentally insert after each line: 'And by THAT I mean...'"*

Knowing that Molly translated the Creeds into language she believed to be true to the original but updated to retain its core meaning 17 centuries later gave me, and I think many of us, a freedom that kept us coming back to Church each Sunday. That said, an equally salient fact about Molly's approach to the Creeds was that she never divulged what her line by line translations of the Creeds were, and I sure as shootin' wasn't going to do it either!

But I thought, "The Lord's Prayer... I must have been saying that once a day for my entire life. Obviously, it must mean something to me. That should be easy." ...And lo, these many weeks later, here we are!

As the time got closer to tonight, when I was going to wax profound on What The Lord's Prayer Means To Me, I had a series of unsettling realizations.

The first thing I realized is I don't say the Lord's Prayer once a day. I say it once a week ... when I get to Sunday liturgy. So maybe, averaging generously in my favor, I say the Lord's Prayer three times a month.

"Well," I thought, "I am sure I said it once a day when my mother made us say our prayers each night before climbing into bed, so let's get back to that practice now."

Soon after attempting to re-initiate this daily practice of my youth, however, I further realized that when I say the Lord's Prayer on Sunday, I am on auto-pilot twice over: I am not thinking about what the Lord's Prayer means, and I'm not paying any attention to the actual words either. The reason I instantly came to this humbling realization, which I know many if not all of you will find appalling, is this: I now know that I am "mailing it in" when I do say the Lord's Prayer on those Sunday's when I go to church because every time I started to recite it over the past few weeks, ***I couldn't remember the words!!***

I thought at first I was just tired, or had too much on my mind, so over the next 10 days, I'd start saying the Prayer anew, trying again and again to get from its beginning to its end. I refused to look it up, because I just *had* to know the Lord's Prayer, for God's sake!

Each time, I started off fine, but got no further than "hallowed be thy name" and then *could not remember* what came next? ...Was it that temptation and evil part that always threw me with the word "but" in the middle that I always thought should be an "and." ...Or was it that forgiveness and trespasses" thing that came next? I knew that "Give us this day our daily bread" was not long after "hallowed be thy name" ... but I kept hearing the Devil's voice telling me that "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" came near the *end*, not near the beginning, so of course that sealed my fate in trying to remember what came after "hallowed be thy name" because none of the other clauses sounded quite right. \

The long and short of it was that I knew that the Episcopal version ended with "Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever, Amen." But between that and "hallowed be thy name," I was one lost puppy.

OMG! I can't remember the WORDS to the Lord's Prayer, and I'm going to talk about What It Means To Me ... Fraud Alert! Fraud Alert!!

At several points I reminded myself, just to make matters worse, that I was the only one of my siblings not yet diagnosed with some form of dementia, and perhaps the diagnosis was the only thing that separated us. ...But then I thought, well even *they* can still recite the Lord's Prayer! Those things one says every day of one's life are in the long-term memory part of the brain, and are the last to be lost. So, no, it's likely not the dementia, even if I have some of that to add that special something to the addled mess in my brain.

The Lord's Prayer has no residence in my long-term memory because I haven't actually *said* The Lord's Prayer, except at Church. And what's aiding and abetting my inability to remember the Lord's Prayer is the other humbling truth: I've spent multiple decades of my life never giving it a thought ***because I wasn't anywhere near a church.***

...It should have been easy to bail on this assignment once I realized the embarrassing and potentially humiliating quandary in which I found myself. Mark even gave me an out, emailing me this morning to ask in his re-assuring way, if I was "going to be able" to do the Lord's Prayer presentation tonight –gently raising the pertinent subject of my capacity to pull this off –even with no idea how bad things really were!– while also wanting to spare me the nervous breakdown I frequently think I am about to have.

"Yes..." I replied uncertainly. Then, "YES! The well is truly empty at the moment, but I'll come up with something!" ...Mark tossed me a softball and I watched it hit the plate and roll between my legs. I'm not sure why... that creeping dementia thing, perhaps, or maybe just the stubborn, willful need to pretend I'm still in control? Everyone who knows me at all will think they have the answer to this. But only God knows.

...And I guess there's some comfort in the context of Chapter 6 of Matthew's gospel, in which Jesus teaches his disciples about the manifold traps of false piety in both word and deed, and then gives his disciples the words to pray that are a simple but profound how-to manual for humbly reverencing their God, in both word and deed.

So far, I think I've demonstrated conclusively, at least in this particular, narrow context, that I am a creature of *no* piety whatsoever, so I feel fairly confident I've avoided false piety as well.

Given the wretched reality that I can't remember and haven't much thought about the Lord's Prayer, I *have* given a bit of thought lately, as you might imagine, as to WHY this is so.

My first thought was to go back to my memory of those childhood bedtime prayers, which should have put the Lord's Prayer in my long-term memory for good. I quickly remembered that I did say one prayer each night, before the God bless Mom and Dad and the rest of my family part that preceded "Amen." The one prayer I said every night, which was embroidered on a very old piece of muslin framed above my bed, was NOT the Lord's Prayer, and I remember it PERFECTLY:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
If I should live another day,
I pray the Lord to guide my way.

From the age of 3 until sometime in my 8th year when my mother stopped monitoring our nightly prayers, this prayer scared the bejesus out of me. I might ***die*** before morning...WHAT???!!!

It did not give me much confidence in a benevolent God who had my back, and did not inspire me to expect great things from church, either. So, to avoid being even more deeply frightened by whoever and whatever God was, I tried hard not to pay any attention to the actual words of the church liturgy.

This wasn't all that difficult to accomplish because, as some of you may recall, it was an interminably long service (in what some call the "high church" smells and bells tradition), and all of my concentration was

devoted to trying not to fidget, and to preventing my sister from passing out and clunking her head on the wooden pew.

As some of you may also remember, I adored my mother and always followed her example, so my deliverance from ever having to go to church again came on the day of my Confirmation at age 13, when my mother announced on the drive home that she had done her job with the confirmation of her youngest child and would not ever be going to church again. “Lordy,” I thought, “maybe God IS good!” ...And I didn’t darken the door of any church for the next 21 years.

...So much for early imprinting of the Lord’s Prayer!

I returned to church in my mid-thirties, after discovering in the intervening years that my mother—a woman of deep faith who had little faith in organized religion—had succeeded in her objective to lay the foundation stones for what emerged as my own deep, if unconventional, faith—one that, in my case, longed for a community whose reverence for a just, inclusive and compassionate God would invite the presence of the Holy into the space we shared. I found that community three times in succession, one leading right to the other, in the intervening 28 years. God is, indeed, good.

So from whence came my difficulties remembering the Lord’s Prayer even after 28 years of realizing and living into an ever deepening and, to me, ever more miraculous faith?

Other than lack of use and distractions of higher imperatives in those early, imprinting years—as noted, the perceived need to pray seriously hard each night that God would NOT let me “die before I wake,” and the maternal imperative not to fidget and to prevent my sister from fainting in church—I returned to church decades later without understanding or valuing the riches of the Lord’s Prayer, so I didn’t bother giving it any more attention than I ever had. Lent and Easter fired my heart and mind with infinite relevance and constantly renewable epiphanies. The rest was frozen in ancient history whose present relevance eluded me.

The Rev. Molly McGreevy, my friend and “rabbi” (from the Hebrew “rabboni” meaning teacher and master) who so fittingly died on All Saint’s Day in 2014, gave me the key to unlock my capacity to respond to the invitation offered by the Lord’s Prayer. Finally, in the last week or so, remembering the wisdom of Molly’s simultaneous translations to update ancient texts into our own language of faith made possible the very personal discovery of what the Lord’s Prayer means to me.

So here are the first fruits of this new journey:

“Our Father...”

...Wait, wait, wait, wait, *WAIT!!!* Who said God is a *father*? What happened to God as Creator of All?

Genesis gives us ample evidence that God’s creation of animate creatures consists of *both* male *and* female.

And the creation story doesn’t start with any gender duality at all: God first created Light and Darkness, Day and Night, the Dome of the Sky, Earth and Sea, plants bearing fruit and grain, the Sun, the Moon and the Stars. Only *then* are animate creatures introduced and any references to gender.

In God’s taxonomy, furthermore, it’s *mothers* who give birth; in whose wombs something is created out of nothing capable of life. Fathers, too, are necessary, but nurturance and nourishment are given first to mothers to provide.

I know, I know: Jesus’ reference to God as “Father” was breaking radical new ground, suggesting God’s intimate connection with us and God’s infinite and tender care for us no matter how imperfect we are. But now? Now it’s such an incomplete reference, and for some of us, grossly inaccurate in the limitations it

imposes on our picture of God. God is so much more. God is the One Who Loves —utterly, completely, beyond any dichotomies or categories.

“Our Father” —right there at the beginning, impossible to ignore— still stops me, *every single time*. I settle for the translation I say every time —*say out loud*— to keep me moving forward into the Love to which the prayer invites me: ***“Mother/Father God...”***

“who art in heaven...”

What’s “heaven”...?

...For me, heaven is the goodness we know in the center of our hearts, the deepest intuition we are sometimes lucky enough to see, hear, smell, touch, and experience in realms beyond our senses, of God in us and with us.

The natural disasters we witness in our lifetimes, and the evil things, large and small, for which humans are responsible —the desecrations that stain our earth and its creatures, which crowd us on all sides and threaten to eradicate beauty from the only life we know through our senses— remind us, by the very starkness of the contrast, of the heaven we know is possible, of God’s creation groaning toward the perfection God’s infinite Love most desires.

“Hallowed be thy name.”

“Hallowed” — holy, consecrated, sacred, revered, venerated, sanctified...

For me, the only understanding I have of God is as the Creator of All, the animating energy from which everything in creation originated. If that’s so, then all of creation —every particle in the cosmos—is of God, shares the DNA of God, and has within it potential for God’s goodness.

If we truly hold God in our hearts and minds as hallowed, our purpose must be to lean in toward that wholeness, that sacred DNA. If we believe in the prayer and promise of God’s Kingdom coming and God’s will being done, we must hallow not only God’s name but the potential of our own hallowing as creatures made of God’s own essence.

“Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

I am reminded here that the Lord’s Prayer is a prayer. It’s not a statement about what is, but a request that reflects all our hopes, and an affirmation of certainty in God’s promise to us.

God’s Kingdom will come and the will of God shall be done when the promises to those who are deemed “Blessed” in the Beatitudes are fulfilled *here* —not in some distant heaven, but here in some present now.

In that here and now, there will no longer be a need for God to pronounce special blessing on those who suffer. The dichotomy in that here and now —between the weeping and suffering on earth to which we try to bear truthful witness and hope to alleviate, and the heaven of Union with the One who created us of its own cosmic DNA— will cease to have meaning, because those opposing realities will have become one and the same.

“Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...”

For me, these words are reminding us *how to get there*, how we must participate with God for the Kingdom to come and God’s will to be done:

— by asking *only* for our “daily bread” — a metaphor, it seems to me, for the things we truly need, for both body and soul;

- by acknowledging our need for God’s help to engage in the hard discernment of need from want;
- by praying for God’s deliverance from the temptation to take beyond what we need –immersing ourselves in all the evils that result from indulging the “false gods” of our own wants over the real needs of others, our planet and the cosmos;
- by the arduous labor of learning how to forgive others who have broken our trust or broken our hearts, sometimes in ways that we can’t imagine will ever be un-broken, because we understand that any progress on our road to forgiving others rests entirely on God’s forgiveness of our daily commissions of the very same things we condemn in others. We must learn to forgive for God’s Kingdom to come, and we must be forgiven to learn how to forgive.

“For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever...”

Everything comes from God and is of God. We, too, if we live ever more fully into what we ask in this prayer and what it asks of us.

“Amen.”

So be it.

...

***Our Mother/Father God who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us,
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
For ever and ever.
Amen.***

...