

“Our Father. Who is in heaven. Holy is your name.”

February 21, 2021

Exodus 3: 1-15 and Matthew 6:9-13

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

One year ago, we began to realize that a virus which originated in China had made it to our country. We had no idea, at that time, the devastation it would leave over the course of a year as it swept through our communities and our families. Our Session, here at Peace Presbyterian Church, made a decision at our March session meeting, one year ago, to close down our facility and move to remote worship, adhering to the recommendation of medical experts to stay at home, in the effort to stop the spread of Covid 19. We were just beginning the season of Lent and had celebrated Ash Wednesday. I was convinced that we would be back to in person worship in our beautiful sanctuary by Easter. Easter came and went. Pentecost came and went. Summer approached and we decided to worship outside under the Peace Oak Tree, which we did until the weather, in October, prevented us from worshipping outside. It has been a long and tragic year. This coronavirus has reeked havoc on, not only our bodies, but our economic life and our ability for community, for hugs, for face-to-face engagement. And many of the changes in our lives to which we have had to adapt may be here to stay. In other words, our post-pandemic world will be different than our world pre-pandemic. We will not be able to simply go back to the way the world was in February of last year.

Dr. Stephen Cherry, Dean of Spirituality at King College in Cambridge, England, contends that we are now, one year later after the onslaught of Covid19, in a season to consider our basic values, including our basic Christian tenets. He invites us to consider the Lord's Prayer as a basic primer for our life together in a post pandemic world, which is full of anxiety producing changes, in his book "Thy Will Be Done." When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how they ought to pray, Jesus responded with the powerful words of what we lovingly know as the Lord's Prayer. I will use Dr. Cherry's book and other resources during the season of Lent to inform a series of sermons focusing on the Lord's Prayer. I invite you to join us each Sunday as we hear again the words Jesus teaches us.

Prayer for Understanding:

Read Matthew 6: 1-13

Jesus prefaces his instruction of what prayer is by telling what prayer is not. He criticizes the people who "heap up empty phrases because they think they will be heard because of their many words." "Whatever prayer might be, it is neither an opportunity to impress others nor one to provide God with information." (Cherry, page 5) Prayer is not to get what we want, nor to ask God to do our bidding. The first half of the Lord's Prayer is all about God. It is an affirmation of God and God's intentions for our life; Jesus want us to begin our prayer not with ourselves, but with God. If we begin with God, then when we shift to asking God to act on behalf of ourselves, our perspective of what

exactly our needs are may shift.

Today and next week we will consider the first half of the Lord's Prayer. The part focusing on God.

“Our Father”

To whom are we praying? If we are not just talking to ourselves, or to our collective unconsciousness, or to the projection of our desires, to whom are we talking? “Our Father”, says Jesus. Jesus called God “Abba” which is the family word for father; it denotes familiarity and intimacy, compassion and caring. Jesus is not telling us that God is male - that is our 21st century issue, not his. Jesus is describing God as a personal, involved parent, who lovingly cares for all his children. We would probably use the word “daddy”. In a day when his contemporaries made God so remote and transcendent that they could not pronounce the sacred name, Jesus cried “Abba, Father” and taught his disciples to do the same. God as intimate, loving parent was a radical new understanding of the divine for the first century Jewish community.

But who is this intimate parent God? More than anything else Jesus describes the love of God. God is not sometimes loving and sometimes unloving. God is love and everything God does, always, in his dealings with everyone, is loving. Love is God's very nature and is reflecting in the words and actions of his Son. God's love is universal, unconditional, initiating and faithful. Even when those whom God loves are faithless, God remains faithful to them. Like the father who welcomes his sons home. They may desert him, but God will not desert his children. It is God's greatest desire to be in loving

relationship with all of Creation. This is the God to whom we are to pray.

Jesus also teaches us to pray “Our” father. God is not your private father or mine. How many of you come from a family with more than one child? If you come from a family with sisters and brothers, you know that you quickly learn that there are some things you cannot ask your parent to do. If you were an only child you might ask, but God has no only children. You cannot ask for personal advantage that will cost one of God’s other children dearly. You cannot ask for your nation to prosper at the expense of other nations, or your church at the expense of other churches. The “our” in “Our Father” constitutes us as brothers and sisters who pray for one another as well as for ourselves. To say “Our Father” means that we pray out of a community of beloved children, as one member of a family of many.

“Who art in heaven”. To say Our Father, who art in heaven is to speak of the “otherness” of God. Isaiah says: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55: 8-9) God’s way of being, God’s way of knowing, God’s way of loving are not just like ours. They are never fully understood or grasped. We cannot project our human images onto God. God is not simply more than who we are; God is holy other. We were created in God’s image, not the other way around. Even John Calvin says that we should not speculate theoretically about the essence of God’s being; we can only contemplate God in his works. God is intimate loving parent, but God is also holy other. Immanent and

transcendent.

“Hallowed be thy name”.

The story goes that once there was a 6 year old boy who was anxious to get home after Sunday School so that he could share with his parents the content of the day’s lesson. As they were gathered about the Sunday dinner table, the little boy informed his parents that he had learned God’s name in Sunday School that morning. “Really,” his mother replied, intrigued. “It is Harold”, her young son proudly announced. Puzzled, the father asked, “Harold? How did you get that?” “Well”, explained young son, “we learned the Lord’s Prayer - you know the part when you say ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, Harold be thy name.’”

What does it mean when we say that God has a name and it is to be hallowed? In the Old Testament reading this morning we hear Moses asking for God’s name because the people will surely ask him.

Read Exodus 3.

What is the name of the God who sends you? What does it mean when you have a name? It means that you are a subject and not merely an object. In the modern city we rub against hundreds of people each day whose names we do not know. They are part of the traffic, the grocery line. We cooperate with them or struggle with them. But then we meet someone whose name we know, and who knows our name and the whole feel of things is different. Suddenly some sort of relationship is remembered and continued. We become aware of what Martin Buber calls the “I-thou encounter”; aware of each other’s

dignity and worth and freedom.

To have a name also means that we have a story. Your parents gave you a name at birth and that name may have a family history associated with it. So it is that God's name also has a story attached. "Say to the people that I am the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebekah, and the God of Jacob and Rachel and Leah." To know someone's name is to know something about that person. And it is God who reveals his name to us. We do not get to name God.

And God's name is to be kept holy; set apart from all other names. That is what "hallowed" means. May God's name be kept honored and respected as is no other name. "Hallowed it be thy name" is a petition for the restoration and reverence of God in our secular world. It seems to me that we use God's name a little too loosely in our world - we use God's name to justify our actions, to maintain power or control, to get what we want in prayer, to express our intense dislike. In our secular world we use God's name a little too casually. The people of Israel understood that to call on the name of the divine was to unleash a power in the world that was to be both feared and worshiped. Holy is your name O God.

Jesus instructs us to begin our prayer by focusing on who God is - this moves us beyond our particular self interests and agendas, to perceive and experience ourselves and our world as part of God's world.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, holy is your name." Next week we will consider God's kingdom.