

## Pray Like This...And Live Like This

*Sermon prepared by the Rev. Douglas Clark for August 9, 2015 – Ordinary 19*

*First Congregational Church, Haddam, CT*

*“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”*

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. --- Matthew 6:1-8 (NRSV); Matthew 6:9-15 (KJV)

“After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” --- Matthew 6:9-15 (KJV)

As you know, my wife Mary and I attended the International Academy of Practical Theology conference in Pretoria, South Africa in July. For me as a guest, the conference was a stimulating and thought-provoking combination of lectures, seminars, worship services, field trips, and social gatherings. I'm still processing this experience, still thinking about the theme of the conference: "Practicing Ubuntu."

One of our worship services was held in the Anglican Church of the Holy Cross in Soweto. During that service, the choir sang the Lord's Prayer in Zulu. We also prayed the Lord's Prayer in our own native languages—conference participants came from twenty different countries, and our prayer in many languages sounded like the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. We also repeated one sentence of the Lord's Prayer in Zulu: Your will be done on earth, O Lord—"Mayenziwe 'ntando yakho."

It should come as no surprise that we prayed in Zulu, one of the native languages of the black Africans who make up 80% of the population of South Africa. It should come as no surprise that we prayed in Zulu specifically for God's will to be done on earth—for there is overwhelming evidence in South Africa, as well as in the United States, of a rather large chasm between God's will and what we humans do on earth.

The hopes and promises of the end of apartheid in South Africa twenty years ago remain largely unfulfilled for millions of black South Africans. The hopes and promises of the American civil rights movement half a century ago remain in some serious ways unfulfilled for black and brown Americans. In the United States as well as in South Africa, far too many people are still judged by the color of their skin and not by the content of their character.

This past week marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, which was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on August 6, 1965. Even though Congress re-authorized this legislation in 2006, the Supreme Court, in 2013, in the case of *Shelby County vs. Holder*, invalidated a portion of this legislation, thus opening the door to a "new era of voter suppression."<sup>1</sup> Just this past week for instance, "a federal appeals panel ruled...that a strict voter identification law in Texas discriminated against blacks and Hispanics and violated the Voting Rights Act of 1965."

Jamal Hagler, who is a nephew of one of my clergy friends and colleagues from my days in Maryland, recently wrote: "Throughout the nation, state legislatures have made efforts to pass laws that have the potential to significantly reduce eligible voters' ability to cast ballots at the polls. Reducing early voting, ending same-day registration, and implementing voter ID requirements are a few examples of attempts to make voting more difficult.

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1 Jamal Hagler, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2015/08/06/118888/it-is-time-to-update-the-voting-rights-act/>.

“While these new tactics do not explicitly restrict voting rights for anyone based on their race or ethnicity, studies have shown that these laws and rules present significant obstacles to people of color, the elderly, and low-income individuals as they attempt to exercise their right to vote. Implemented under the guise of reducing voter fraud—which is nearly nonexistent—these new laws reduce voter registration and turnout,”<sup>2</sup> especially among people of color.

So what do the Lord's Prayer and the Voting Rights Act have to do with one another? Quite a lot, it turns out.

When you and I pray together the Lord's Prayer, when we pray for God's will to be done on earth, we don't say these simple, familiar words in isolation or ignorance of what's going on around us here on this earth. In fact, every time we pray for God's will to be done on earth, we should be reminded of the ways in which God's will is not done on earth. And what is God's will for us, and for all persons? To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly (Micah 6:8). In today's world, whether in South Africa or in the United States, justice is not being done when those in power seek to make voting more difficult for certain groups of people.

When we pray for God's will to be done on earth, we are quite aware of our limited ability and opportunity to influence the big issues confronting our society—such as racism, economic inequality, climate change, the proliferation of nuclear weapons. What we can do, however, what does lie within the realm of possibility for us, is to be and to become the kind of community envisioned in the Sermon on the Mount as a whole and the Lord's Prayer in particular. We can work for God's will to be done in our congregation, not only in how we relate to one another, but also in how we relate to the wider world.

According to biblical scholar Warren Carter, who has written extensively on the gospel of Matthew, the Lord's Prayer “constructs a worldview and shapes the community which prays it to live accordingly.”<sup>3</sup> The worldview of the Lord's Prayer (which is at the literary and spiritual center of the Sermon on the Mount) is that the church, the community of followers of Jesus, not only **hears** the words of Jesus, but also **acts on** them, puts them into practice (Matthew 7:24).

This prayer of Jesus is not the prayer of a solitary individual seeking help or guidance for a personal problem. Rather, it is a communal prayer. It's not about me and God: it's about we and God. It's about **our** Father, not **my** Father. It's about asking for **our** daily bread, not **my** daily bread. It's about forgiving **us** our debts, not forgiving **me** my debts. It's about saving **us** from temptation and evil.

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2 Ibid.

3 Cited in Anna Case-Winters, *Matthew*, 107.

This prayer of Jesus reminds us that God is both present with us, and yet beyond all our knowing. “Our Father,” in Aramaic, the language that Jesus and his disciples spoke, is a way of addressing God with intimacy, but also with dignity and respect. Years ago, I heard a little Jewish boy address his father, who was the rabbi in a nearby synagogue, as “Abba”—which is exactly the same word Jesus used when he taught his disciples to pray.

At the same time, “hallowed be thy name” reminds us of the distance between us and God: God is not our best buddy, God is not Santa Claus, God is not a parking space angel. In the wonderful words of Brian Wren: “Great, living God, never fully known, joyful darkness far beyond our seeing, closer yet than breathing, everlasting home.”<sup>4</sup>

Let me invite you now to sing this prayer of Jesus, keeping in mind both our closeness to God and our distance from God. I've set these words to the tune “Brother James' Air”:

1. Our father who in heaven art/Thy name be hallowed.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done/on earth as now in heaven.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done/on earth as now in heaven.
2. Give us this day our daily bread/And us our sins forgive.  
As we forgive and love again/Those who have done us wrong.  
As we forgive and love again/Those who have done us wrong.
3. O lead us not temptation's way/And us from evil save.  
Thine is the kingdom, glory, power/Both now and evermore.  
Thine is the kingdom, glory, power/Both now and evermore.

This prayer of Jesus is located at both the literary and the spiritual center of the Sermon on the Mount. And the prayer for forgiveness—forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors—is located at both the literary and the spiritual center of the Lord's Prayer. Which reminds us that the very heart and soul of the Christian life is found in forgiveness. In the words of the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ: “God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace.”

Knowing that God forgives us is the foundation for forgiving one another. In African-American Christianity: forgiveness offered to Dylann Roof by the families of those he murdered at Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, SC. In South Africa: Truth and Reconciliation Commission: amnesty offered to those who took responsibility for the injustices of apartheid. Not cheap grace, but costly grace.

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4 Brian Wren, “Bring Many Names” (*Hymns of Truth & Light*, #6).

In the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “there is no future without forgiveness.” In the words of American theologian Anna Case-Winters: “Neither the forgiver nor the forgiven acquires the power that simply cuts off the past and leaves us alone to face the future: both have discovered that their past, with all its shadows and injuries, is now what makes it imperative to be reconciled so that they may live more fully from and with each other.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Case-Winters, referring to Rowan Williams, 117.