**Luke 11:1-2a** June 26, 2016

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*This sermon is the first of a series on the Lord’s Prayer*

*Luke 11:1 One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” 2 He said to them, “When you pray, say: ‘Father…’”*

**When You Pray, Say: Father**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Once in a while, people come along and pay us compliments. We appreciate compliments. “Nice job. You made a great presentation today at work!” “The flowers and yard around your house look beautiful!” It makes us feel good. Someone noticed, someone appreciated. There is another kind of compliment that makes us feel even better. It goes something like this: “Those flowers in front of your house, tell me how you get them to look like that?” “That presentation, can you teach me how to make a presentation like that?” Those compliments are not just appreciation, they acknowledge that you know or can do something really great. People want some secret knowledge you seem to possess!

The most meaningful example of this—and this sort of thing probably only happens once or twice in a life—is when someone sits down and says something like, “You’re such a patient person. Can you teach me how to be that patient?” Or, “Can you teach me how to be such a joyful person, even when times are tough?” These compliments are not just about presentations or flowers. It’s like they have seen into the core of who you are and they want to be like that. It’s a such a high compliment that you just hope you can meet the expectations you hear hiding behind those words.

**I. “Teach Us to Pray”**

The disciples in our reading have one of those moments. Jesus’ disciples, his closest followers, could be real knuckleheads. We often read that in the Bible. Do you remember last week’s Gospel reading? The people of one village said, “We don’t want Jesus coming into our town.” And two of his disciples turned to Jesus and said, *“Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven and destroy them?”* (Luke 9:54) Jesus rebuked them. “You guys got it wrong—all wrong.” I’m glad that the Bible records those things because I can be a knucklehead too, and actually a lot worse. Well, those disciples could be knuckleheads sometimes, but sometimes they really got things right. This reading is one of them.

Here they give Jesus one of those really big compliments. The Bible often mentions Jesus praying. In the Gospel of Mark, near the beginning of his ministry, there is a fabulous example of how Jesus prayed. *“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.”* (1:35). At the end of his ministry, when he knew that the soldiers and guards were coming to arrest him and put him to death, what was Jesus doing? Praying. Another time, after spending all day teaching a huge crowd, and then miraculously feeding them, what did Jesus do? He didn’t throw his coat on the couch and fall into the lazy-boy. He sent his disciples away, and as the sun set and the night fell he started hours of prayer. And it goes on. When he was baptized, when he was transfigured, there Jesus was, praying.

And so, in our reading, kind of in the middle of Jesus’ ministry, God’s Word tells us this: ***“One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray.’”***

Did you hear the compliment? For the thousandth time in their lives the disciples looked at Jesus and saw him praying, fervently, for hours on end, early in the morning, or maybe in the middle of the night. Then they looked at themselves and their lives and all the times they had been knuckleheads and just plain stupid. And they thought about how they worried, and how they hadn’t always lived good lives, and about the arguments they got into, and that time they wanted to call fire from heaven. Then they look at Jesus, and finally ask him, ***“Lord, teach us to pray.”*** Compliments like that don’t come along often. I hear the disciples crying out in despair. They realize their foolishness, their selfishness, their prayerlessness, their sin. They want what Jesus has. The contentment, the certainty, the power to be a good example, the consistency of life, the joy. ***“Lord, teach us to pray.”***

And that is what I am thinking too. I do not have the right priorities. I am scatter-brained. I get confused about what is important. I fall short of my responsibilities professionally and personally. I am not all that God wants me to be. And I am that way because of choices that I make and am personally responsible for. You see, I am a sinner.

There is a sign in town that says, “Effort affects outcome.” Have you seen it? “Effort affects outcome.” The reason I am not a better Christian, the reason I sin, is because my effort is too low. God promises to give me the power to conquer sin and temptation, but I choose not to! And so I too watch Jesus, (and sometimes even you fellow Christians) and I realize that part of that problem is that I don’t pray like I should. Maybe you, too, would like to go to Jesus with me and say, ***“Lord, teach us to pray.”***

Jesus’ closest followers asked Jesus how to pray. Jesus’ answer is positively golden. His answer is what we call the Lord’s Prayer. With the goal to help us pray better we study the Lord’s Prayer in this sermon series. This prayer has eight parts. Today we look at the first part which is called The Address.

**II. “When You Pray, Say: ‘Father.”**

*A. Approaching Through Jesus* While we can, and should, often approach our heavenly Father in prayer, we know we do not deserve that right. From birth – and we know this from our own honest examinations of our thoughts, words and deeds – we are undeserving. We have disgraced our heavenly Father. We have disobeyed his words, pretended that we didn’t know his requirements, made excuses.

And we realize that Jesus, the one who told us to go to the Father, is the only reason we can pray to God the Father. Our sins are covered by the forgiveness Jesus won for us on his cross. The bridge between God and us is rebuilt through the work of Jesus. That is why we can address him as “Father.” No one may pray to the Father on his own goodness. Anyone who goes to God and says, “Hey, I’ve tried hard. You need to listen to me” doesn’t understand who they are. Our prayer to God is a confident prayer based on how Jesus, the perfect Son of God, introduces us into the Father’s presence. Jesus grants us access. We pray saying, “Father, Jesus has said that I may come to you in his name.”

*B. Father* When Jesus begins teaching them how to pray, he tells them, ***“When you pray, say: ‘Father.’”***

In the beginning of May I went up to Indianapolis. You sent me there for continuing education. I and maybe 70 or 80 other pastors listened to a professor talk about Islam. Right here is one of his starting points in talking with Muslims. Islam has the “99 Names of Allah.” “Allah the Mighty, the First, the Last, the Only, the Magnificent,” etc. But you know what name is not in the list? “Father.” Father is not in that list. That is who Jesus tells us to pray to. “Jesus, teach me to pray.” Ok, start with, “Father.” It’s not in Islam, but it is the basis for every Christian prayer to the only true God.

Beautiful! Here we leave behind all the imperfections we have seen in our own fathers, good as they were. And here we leave behind the miserable excuses of fathers that often make the news. And here we arrive at the ideal that committed, thoughtful, strong fathers wish they could be. The perfect Father, our God.

Can you imagine how hard it would be to get a personal audience with a president, with an entertainment star, with a top-level sports personality? How much more so, God? But any 8-year old can get into the office of any famous person at any time of day, if that 8-year old happens to be their child. When the celebrity, congressman or billionaire shuts off his cell phone, in the middle of the night, that daughter or son can still come in, sit on the corner of the bed and say “Dad,” and expect a full hearing.

And you, ***“When you pray, say: ‘Father.’”*** Cool! So what’s this Father like?

*C. The Father We Respect* One of the shocking things about visiting Africa, after marveling at the grass-roofs, the dirt floors, the worn clothes, etc., when you start observing life rather than the stuff—one thing you notice is the culture of respect. This isn’t the gold chains, body-covering tattoos, sunglasses variety of self-seeking respect. It is the respect of dignity and responsibility. To an American, this culture of respect is almost worrying.

I am a guest at a house for lunch. I sit in a chair with a low table, a coffee table, in front of me. The woman of the house, or her daughter if she has a teen-age daughter, brings the man of the house and me a meal. When she places the food on the table, she kneels on the ground, sometimes the dirt floor of the house. She places the food on the table and then departs, without a word. It is respect given to a guest, to make yourself a servant in your own house. And we Americans, with our value of equality, are horrified. To be honest, I never totally got used to it in almost two decades. Jesus’ culture was much more like that African culture. Total respect is the sort of thing Jesus wrapped up in the name “Father”.

But for a variety of reasons, the culture around us does not want to portray fathers in a positive light. I think most of us hold our fathers in pretty high esteem, but society at large does not. Think of how dads are always portrayed as the forgetful clueless ones on the screen—or if they are competent, then they are cruel and heartless. This is obviously not what fathers aspire to, nor what most are like, nor what Jesus had in mind. Jesus holds up our Father in heaven as the perfect father, one worthy of respect.

Not in the sense of cringing fear, but acknowledgement of the fact that he is much greater than we are. Yes, our Father in heaven is loving. More soon on that. But first of all, by calling him Father in heaven, we remember that God is not our buddy, but someone greater.

***“When you pray, say: ‘Father.’”***

*D. The Loving Father* The name “Father” carries respect because it carries the weight of life-long commitment. It is a Father’s duty in all times, in good and bad, to be there for the child. A real father doesn’t duck out when the going gets tough. He doesn’t obsess about his own interests and desires, his “dreams”. The “Father” that Jesus told us to pray to has an undying interest and concern in his children’s lives. This sort of Father would sooner starve himself and tighten his belt than see his children hungry. When we say “Our Father, who art in heaven” we call on one who is completely loving and committed.

And by the way, this is another name the false god of Islam does not have. Of the “99 names of Allah”, none of them is “Loving”. Jesus taught us to call on The Father, whose essence is loving. No, Islam does not know a Loving Father like our god, nor do we know their god.

***“When you pray, say: ‘Father.’”***

*E. The Dependable Father* Which boils down to the reason that we pray to God. It’s the same reason we ask a loving father for something. Since he is greater and stronger than us, and since he is loving enough to use his strength for us, we know he is dependable.

Faith trusts God, even when we don’t get the answer we want. A truly trusting child may be disappointed when the request for a toy is denied. But the trusting child is also content with that somewhat disappointing answer because the child knows his dad is dependable.

***“When you pray, say: ‘Father.’”*** That’s what Jesus taught us. A strong, loving, dependable Father. What is not to love? What is not to trust? Pray, ***“Our Father, who art in heaven.”*** That’s just the beginning. Amen.