

LORD,
TEACH US
TO *PRAY*

SERMONS on the
LORD'S PRAYER

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Foreword

Welcome to this sermon series that offers you a window into the life of Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey, situated on Palmer Square and thus, as Dave Davis often reminds us, “in the heart of town and physically adjacent to Princeton University.” In this space Nassau’s congregational life and witness gives glory to God as it cares for the life of the heart and mind and for the life of the world in Princeton, in Trenton (a very different community just down the road, where we have partnerships), and in places as far-flung as Guatemala, Myanmar, and Nepal.

These 2015 Lenten sermons on the Lord’s Prayer were offered alongside a church-wide small group discussion of the phrases of the prayer Jesus gave us, so members could reflect on the familiar prayer in corporate study as well as in worship. Members of the senior high group studied the prayer and several of them prepared short sermons on “daily bread” for Youth Sunday that are included in this volume. Four Eastertide sermons on the four gospel resurrection accounts expanded our reflection on the conclusion of the prayer. Nassau seeks to be a more and more open and welcoming congregation, and as one small sign of welcome, Sunday by Sunday those gathered for worship are encouraged to pray the prayer in the language and version closest to their own heart.

Over the fifteen years that Dave Davis has served as Nassau's pastor, there has developed what might be called an unwritten but much valued "covenant of expectations" about the range of content of his sermons. First, Scripture will have a central place in the sermon. Although that might sound self-evident, the key word is "central"; the biblical text is never just a springboard for something else.

Second, the world and its concerns are not left aside in the preaching life of this congregation. Nassau welcomes all, and its membership is diverse in its theological and political perspectives, but this does not mean that difficult issues in the news media are left at the door. In this regard Nassau's preaching life differs from that of many congregations, regardless of where they may place themselves on a theological spectrum. As you read these sermons, notice how "current events," issues of violence and intolerance, race, poverty, and division in the body politic nationally and globally, are incorporated into the congregation's community discourse. People talk to Dave at the door, or by email or phone, and equally important, they also they talk to one another. Week by week, sermons model for us how as Christians we can grapple with hard issues in the light of our faith, not as if in a separate realm.

For some readers, these sermons will provide an opportunity to slow down and reflect on the craft or structuring of sermons. While always central, Scripture is presented in differing ways, even as the sermons are developed in varying ways. Observe, for example, the openings. One sermon may begin with a series of single verses or phrases from various parts of Scripture. Another begins with a retelling or review of the text just read. Another begins with phrases evoking a particular emotion in different aspects

of our daily life. Another begins with a single contemporary story, while yet another begins with several personal stories—and the connection among them emerges only in an unexpected tie to the biblical text for the morning. But always the connection to the biblical text becomes clear; there are no illustrations “for the sake of illustration,” just to keep the congregation paying attention. In sum, the text of the day is itself always in one sense or another the core illustration for the sermon. Sometimes that happens through close attention to a single word—whether through sharing a debate over translation, or the range of meanings in Greek, or commentators’ efforts to make sense of an unusual word. Sometimes it happens through a retelling of the biblical narrative or parable so as to embed it more deeply in the hearers. And depending on where that retelling is situated in the sermon and how it is worded, it can carry overtones of contemporary issues without overt reference. Watch, for example for the appearance of cell-phone pictures in the retelling of the parable of the king and the unforgiving servant (Lent V, Matt 18:21-35).

The illustrations in these sermons work because Dave is a gifted storyteller who can create the scene. Note, for example, the small reference to “a lamp with pull chain” on a lectern that sets the scene in a funeral home. Notice how even seemingly “academic” information about Greek words or about debating commentators or about variation in gospel accounts is incorporated in a “story-telling” way, illustrating some aspect of the church’s journey of faith. But in the end, how well the illustrations are crafted is not the most important point. What is most important, important *theologically*, is that the stories are real, not made up. As Jesus used situations from the everyday life to

teach his disciples, so Dave has a gift for discerning God's presence in what appears to be so very ordinary all around us. As the congregation hears such examples Sunday after Sunday, we are helped to grow in our own ability to reflect on God's presence in the "little things" as we live in faith, hope, and love.

As I have read and re-read these sermons I have found myself once again brought into the presence of the Holy One in a way that evokes a response that is for me not only spiritual or intellectual, but actually visceral. Will that happen for the reader who is not part of Nassau's worshipping community, who has not listened to podcasts or cannot quite catch in the mind's ear the cadence of the words? I pray that in the power of God's Spirit every reader will be encouraged, challenged, blessed, and transformed by what Dave Davis shares here.

Katharine Doob Sakenfeld

Nassau Congregant, Professor Emerita

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“Our Father, Who Art in Heaven”

Matthew 6:9-13

LENT I

Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

Way before I was born, my father played professional football. When I started to play, he taught me some things that the coaches never did. Like...almost all of the time, a quarterback is going to subconsciously look in the direction that the play will go before the ball is hiked; you can tell by the pressure a lineman puts on his hands whether the play will be a run or a pass; the person hiking the ball always grabs tighter right before the snap. Each of these small tidbits helped me make quite a few plays back in the day. Often right in the moment, or maybe after the game in the locker room, or now years later when I remember, it makes me think of my Dad and how he taught me.

In the first few months after I was ordained, I was visited in my office at the church by a retired pastor whose name was Ed. At that time, he had been retired longer than I had been alive. Ed gave me a whole bunch of advice that morning. One piece was this, “David, you will always have

to work at understanding the church budget, money, and stewardship as well as the treasurer, the finance chair, or members of session. They don't realize it, but most church members would prefer their pastor not understand anything about money, in general, and the church finances, in particular. That way they can more easily live by the myth that their faith and their money don't go together. Your job as a spiritual leader is to correct them every week. And it starts by letting them know you understand the church's financial picture better than they do." Whenever I work at understanding a financial statement or prepare a budget or preach stewardship, I remember that old pastor; how he taught me.

When my wife and I were first married, my mother prepared a small notebook with 3x5 cards that had recipes on them. Almost 30 years later, we still use them. The most important recipe there is the secret Davis family barbeque sauce recipe, made available to others only by marriage. You would think I could make that recipe from memory by now, and I probably could. But I always look for the book. I pull out the book and I read the card, not so much for the recipe but because it is in my mother's handwriting. Every time I make that sauce, I do it with gratitude in my heart for my mom, remembering how she taught me.

Jesus said, "*Pray then like this.*" "*Whenever you pray,*" don't be like those who like to be seen. "*Whenever you pray,*" go into your room and shut the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. "*When you are praying,*" do not heap up empty phrases; your Father knows what you need before you ask. "*Pray then like this.*" Jesus said that whenever you pray, when you are praying, and pray then like this: "*Our Father in heaven.*"

When offering his commentary on the Lord's Prayer in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin points out that whenever you call God "Father," whenever you pray to God as "Father," you are really just praying in the name of Christ. Who else, why else, would you dare to call God "Father." "Who would break forth into such rashness," Calvin writes, "as to claim for [themselves] the honor of a [child] of God unless we have been adopted as children of grace in Christ." To pray to God as Father is to "put forward" the name of Christ.

To pray the Lord's Prayer, to begin the Lord's Prayer, it is to remember and offer gratitude for the one who taught us to pray, the one in whom we know ourselves to be God's children, for so we are. Should we have a conversation about the multiple images for God in scripture? Certainly. In the 16th century, Calvin was quoting scripture from Isaiah 49, citing the motherhood of God. Should we affirm together God that is beyond gender? No question. Of course, most are comfortable affirming God has no gender, until someone refers to God as "her" or "she." Should we offer a theological conviction on the personhood of God, that language and image is the only way we have which enables us to name a God of relationship, a God for us, a God with us? Of course. Should we offer space for a pastoral reality check that acknowledges the baggage, the hurt, the grief, and the pain that can come with the term "father" for so many? Yes!

But when you pray, specifically the Lord's Prayer, perhaps Calvin is correct that to pray "Our Father" is not just a way of invoking God, but a means of allowing the heart to think afresh on Jesus and our life in him? "*Pray then like this.*" Every time you pray "Our Father" it is a time to

remember Christ Jesus and to affirm that “*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” The God we know and experience in Christ Jesus, our Lord. *Our Father*. Remember how he taught us.

Anne Lamott, in her short book *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, refers to the Lord’s Prayer as one of the “beautiful pre-assembled prayers.” She compares it to one of the prayers of Thomas Merton, or the 23rd Psalm. Prayers like that “have saved me more times than I can remember,” Lamott writes. “But they are for special occasions. They are dressier prayers, the good china of prayers.” Useful, she argues, when you have enough wits about you to remember, and when you can find yourself entering into enough of a state of trust to even say them. “This would be approximately seven percent of the time,” she concludes. Meaning, that for Anne Lamott, some other form of prayer is what kicks in 93% of the time.

By her own description in the book on prayer, she acknowledges that her family never prayed when she was growing up. People who prayed were ignorant, and her parents were “too hip and intellectual to pray.” I don’t know about you, but my experience of the Lord’s Prayer is different from Anne Lamott’s. Growing up in the Church and serving as a pastor all these years, it’s not a “good china” experience. It’s more like that serving dish passed on from your grandmother that you would be absolutely crushed if someone broke while doing the dishes. The Lord’s Prayer; it’s so deep inside. The Lord’s Prayer at the front of the church with a couple getting married. The Lord’s Prayer

at a hospital bedside with a family. The Lord's Prayer in the cemetery. The Lord's Prayer in a continuing care room. The Lord's Prayer with a mom whose newborn is at her breast. The Lord's Prayer before a Bible study. The Lord's Prayer with second graders. The Lord's Prayer after choir practice. The Lord's Prayer on your knees with your child. The Lord's Prayer in bed that first night of college. The Lord's Prayer somewhere overseas when you were in the service. The Lord's Prayer here in worship. Even the "nones," the non-practicing folks, when life is a flutter it's the Lord's Prayer that gets said. Far more than 7% of the time and something much different than "the good china of prayers." And it all starts with "*Our Father, who art in heaven.*" Remember how Jesus taught us.

Our Father. Sometimes I wonder if the prayer couldn't stop right there. If there are not times when it does stop right there. *Our Father.* Like in an airport when you are waiting to see a loved one who has not been home for such a long time. You start to speak, "Oh, Sweetie..." and nothing else comes out but an embrace. Like when your child experiences the heartbreak of a first break-up, or not making the musical, or getting cut from the team and you start to speak, "Oh Charlie, Oh, Christy..." and you really have no words to say much more. Like when a friend tells you she's pregnant, or they just got a job, or they passed their oral exam...you shout their name and scream a bit, and what's more to say. Like when you walk into the room to offer an embrace to someone whose heart is broken with grief.

To call on, to invoke, to speak, to shout, to weep. To start a prayer and it stops at something like a sigh. "*Our Father,*" like Jesus taught us. Holding your newborn babe in your arms for the first time, encircled there in the room. Some-

one starts it, "*Our Father, who art in heaven,*" and you just can't finish as the tears of joy drip on the receiving blanket. To watch on the news and learn of the Christians brutally murdered by ISIS in Libya, and to know nothing else to say or pray than just "*Our Father,*" or to read the letter Kayla Mueller wrote to her family in the spring of last year. Before she was killed by those who held her hostage, she wrote about her love for her family, and her trust in God. You read it, and no words come. You stare at your computer, at the screen, praying for her, for her family, for this blasted world, and the whole mess, wondering, asking, pleading; where can this all go? But all you can muster is "*Our Father.*" You sit here in the sanctuary on any given Sunday with a heart so heavy with concern or so relieved with joy that all you can say is "*Our Father*" and let the rest of us finish the prayer! "God, Our Father" is more than a way to start. It's a prayer all by itself. Sometimes it's all you can get. A sigh. A gasp. A prayer. Like Jesus taught us.

Not long ago, I was working with a family to prepare for a memorial service for their mother, grandmother, mother-in-law. One of the memories that I won't forget had to do with her mealtime table, and the memories they had of sharing a meal together at mother's table. They told me whether you were having just a sandwich, or breakfast, or more of a holiday meal, the table was always set; placemat, napkin, simple dishes, nothing fancy. The place setting reminded them of her welcome, her hospitality, and how she could make the little things so important. The table was always set. And it told them of her love.

Some tables, some meals, go so far beyond words. The Lord's Table tells of God's love. When you settle in at this

table, sometimes just being here is a prayer. Remembering how he taught us. *Our Father, who art in heaven.*