

January 20, 2013

The National Presbyterian Church

The Lord's Prayer: Heaven Later and Now

Micah 4:1-7; Revelation 18:1-2, 9-13, 17-20

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In our sermons this month and next, we're looking together at the subject of prayer: different prayers in the Bible, by different people in the Bible. We'll focus on those 'different people' when we come to the season of Lent, the weeks leading up to Good Friday and Easter. But, now we're focusing on one prayer in the Bible, the prayer taught us by our Lord Jesus Christ, that we call 'The Lord's Prayer.' You can find this in the Bible in the 6th Chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew right in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount.

The first thing I've said so far in the series, thinking about prayer in general, is that many people quit on prayer because they misunderstand its purpose. They go, as it were, to step two and skip step one, when step one is critical! Step one is to understand that that the foundational purpose of prayer is *not* to get anything from God. It is *not* to ask or get, but it is to communicate. It is to get in touch! If we're thinking about prayer as 'getting' something, then it is the knowledge that you and I can actually 'get in touch' with God that should be first in line! This is the miraculous gift of God – the gift by which we open our mouths and expect that our words will reach the very throne room of heaven. We should be stunned at that; that God should hear us as one of billions on the face of this earth. This should be amazing to us. This is the miracle, the foundational miracle of prayer. And in this regard, we believe prayer always works; it brings us to God, we can actually communicate with God, and through this communication our lives can become intertwined with God's life in a way that nothing in heaven or earth can separate. That is the primary function of prayer, like Facebook, like e-mail, like the telephone: it connects, it puts us in touch. The primary issue is simply (though miraculously) to be in touch with God.

Having said that, though, (and as I mentioned last Sunday) there is no question that prayer, like many conversations, certainly may involve both asking and the expectation of getting – but only secondarily – asking and the expectation of getting. This is true of the Lord's Prayer, which involves six requests. But when we turn to the Lord's Prayer, what we find is that the kinds of things that Jesus

says we're to ask for, aren't, at least to begin with, the kinds of things that most people ask for when they turn to God to prayer!! How does it go?

Our Father who art in Heaven.

This is the address that brings us to God. God lets us in. We're online with God. As if we are logging in to

www.ourfatherwhoartinheaven.com !!

Our Father who art in Heaven . . . hallowed thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

If you wanted to pray informally, if you were just to talk to God as if to a friend, would you be praying that kind of thing? Is this the first kind of request that you think would be in your heart or in your mind? These requests, and there are three of them there (*hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, they will be done*), are not about us at all, nor are they about others.

They are not about emergencies or illness or tragedies. They are about God. They lift us up to God, and if they do involve us, they involve us only to the extent that we are being called to put God at the center of our lives:

"May you do this, Lord, may you help us to place you at the center of our lives.

May we be numbered amongst those who hallow your name, live under your rule, and do your will."

Re-center us! Re-center us! Re-center us on you! because this is the truth: You are, *you are* at the center. (This, for example, is the message of Revelation 4)

Sin in this world is not first of all about grossly wicked deeds, though it may involve that. But sin, the ultimate sin from which all others flow, is the fact that God who—God's very existence is the central one gets pushed off to the side. As C.S. Lewis says (*Mere Christianity*, p.198), "Every morning there is this temptation for all the busyness of the world to claim first place, and God is pushed off to the side." And Jesus calls us in this prayer to ask God to help us push God back in, pull God back in, beg God that God come back in to the very center of our being. Not my will, but thine. Not ours, but yours. These are the central affirmations and requests that Jesus teaches his disciples as the prayer opens, as it begins. "Lord, keep changing me. Keep changing us. Keep changing your church. Keep changing your world until the truth is made manifest that you are at the center, and do not stop. AND . . . ***Don't stop, Lord, until earth becomes like Heaven. Until earth becomes like Heaven.***"

1. "Our Father, who art in Heaven." Wow, we expect God to hear.

2. "Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, they will be done." Re-center us! Re-center us! Re-center us!

3. And then this line, "***On earth as it is in Heaven.***"

This is the line for us to think about today, "***On earth as it is in Heaven.***" It means 'Make earth like heaven, to the fullest extent possible.'

Jesus' assumption here, of course, is that there really is this realm that we call heaven, that it really does exist. He's mentioned it twice: at the beginning – "Our Father who art in heaven; and now, again – "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." Twice in this prayer! . . . the idea that there really is this

dimension of life that is rather like Plato's ideal world, a truly ideal world; a place where all the things that are wrong with this world are right, where it's always well and good and right and perfect, and in which God is seen to be God in a way that we can only cling to just now. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, *we see now as through a mirror darkly, but then we will see face to face . . .* God's reality and presence will one day be apparent in this heavenly realm in a way that will be absolutely inescapable. Jesus believed and taught this.

- Last week we caught a glimpse of heaven through the vision of St John in the 4th chapter of Revelation. It's a chapter in which there is a picture of a throne and God is on the throne, and all the creatures that God has created, of all kinds, are around the throne, and the truth is clear: God is at the center, worshipped and adored: the King of Kings is being hallowed!!
- We also saw a different kind of picture of heaven when we read the Ten Commandments together from Exodus Chapter 20. These commandments reflect the perfect will of God. We struggle with finding and doing God's will on earth, but in heaven God's will ("Thy will") is done clearly, willingly, and perfectly. If you want the embodiment of that will, most clearly and most expansively look at the Ten Commandments; or look at the life of Jesus as a whole and you see that will. Both of these provide us glimpses, pictures, of heaven here on earth.
- In today's Scripture reading in Micah 4, we read of yet another way of thinking about what heaven is like. For Micah Jerusalem is at the center of his vision of heaven – not the physical Jerusalem as such, but Jerusalem as the place or community where God lives. In Micah's vision, people flock to the place where God is, placing God at the center of their lives once again; and doing so because they know that where God is acknowledged to be God there will be justice and fairness and safety for all. All the things that are wrong in life that we scream about and say, "That's just not right," well, heaven is the place where it is right, at last:

In the latter days . . . 2 many nations shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. 3He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; 4but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid! (Micah 4)

- Or think of Revelation 21:2ff that we also read earlier:
"And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is

among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more ...”

This is a picture of Heaven as a community, not just of isolated individuals, but as a community, the city, New Jerusalem descending to earth. This new heaven God is creating, is a city, a new community that is just right (that is, both just and right!); a vision of beauty – like a bride adorned for her husband; a place where beauty and love take center stage. Where the presence of God is obvious. God is at home with his people. God will dwell with them as their God, and they will see this. And there will be no suffering or evil: all evil conquered, all dealt with, all thrown into the lake of fire says the Book of Revelation (20:10), so that there is no more evil, no pain or suffering or mourning.

These are wonderful visions of life as it ought to be: of Heaven! And Jesus clearly believes in this realm and that we will see this realm. We are invited into this realm to see it in all its glory *when we die*. And there is no question, as well, that one of our main goals and functions as a church is to help people get there, and to ensure that we ourselves get there; to acknowledge the good news of the Gospel that Jesus Christ has come to us as a savior who will hold on to us in this life and will never let us go through all of this life, until we come safely to that place after death when we see God face to face.

We cannot get there by ourselves. We are too weak. We are too foolish. We cannot make it, but the Good News is that God has sent us a savior, who will take hold of us, as we take hold of him, and will lead us to our eternal destination. What good news this is! This realm of heaven that is to come, that one day we will see clearly, when we die, with the help of a savior!

It was 31 years ago last week that Air Florida Flight 90 crashed into the Potomac. Some of you remember the event vividly in your minds. When the plane crashed, there were only six survivors at that time. There would have been no survivors at all if it were not for some “saviors” who came along. One was in the form of a helicopter. Others were there on the bridge. One jumped in. But, there was one savior who was in the water already, who was one of the survivors, who had been on the plane. His name was Arland Williams, and he used every last ounce of his energy in the water to drag the others to safety, until, exhausted, he himself drowned.

It’s a most poignant and powerful story of somebody giving their life to the point of death to help people who without help could not have been saved, would not have lived.

We are like that. We are in that water frozen. We cannot pull ourselves to safety, but God in his mercy sends us a Savior to enter our troubled waters with us, one who will lead us all the way through this life to that place in heaven where we will see God clearly.

This is a part of the message with which we have been entrusted, and that is critical to see. ***But, what is also critical to see is this:*** That in the prayer that Jesus teaches us to pray,

He does not teach us to pray like this: *Father, take us out of this world so that we can get to Heaven as quickly as possible.*

He does not ask us to pray, *“Take us away from all this evil mess so that we can escape and be with you right here and now.”*

Sometimes that might be a good prayer (!), ***but it’s not what Jesus teaches us to pray in the prayer that he taught his disciples.*** No! What he teaches them to pray about heaven is this: ***That as much of heaven should come down to earth as possible between now and then, so that we not only experience heaven later, but we experience and we are the ambassadors of Heaven as much as possible here on earth, now:***

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth . . . *right here and now, yes, even through us . . .* as it is in Heaven.

As much of it as is possible. We are not sitting around waiting. We have work to do, commissioned by God. Those who know that our destination is clear, to bring as much of it to view, to be visible in this world, which does not believe in it, as possible.

- If heaven is the place where God’s name is hallowed perfectly, and it is (see Revelation 4, where God is hallowed and honored by all his creatures).
- If heaven is the place where God is seen to be King, I mean there is no doubt about it; God rules and rules his community, his realm.
- If Heaven is the place where God’s will is done perfectly, and there is no doubt about that either.

Then what we are to pray for, for ourselves and for others, and for this world, is that as much of this be seen, visible, experienced as is possible by us and through us.

This is the prayer. Is it your prayer? Is this what you’re praying for when you ask of God, that God be at the center so much so of everything, that this is of Heaven that’s descending to earth, to our lives as individuals, to our lives as a community of God’s people together. Heaven later, yes, yes, but Heaven now, too. This is the prayer!!

So what does it look like in practice? Let me give you three possible examples, and I think there are a myriad of examples because heaven is filled with images that pertain to this life now if we could only summon them to come down to earth. Three images of what this may be like in practice if we are serious about praying that God’s kingdom come, God’s will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.

1. The first one is this, that if heaven invades earth, then **surely there will be more prayer** within our lives and within our church. Heaven after all is the place where God is seen perfectly. It’s the restoration of the Garden of Eden where God is seen “walking amongst his people in the cool of the day,” and they chat

with God as if were just the most familiar thing. So, miraculous as it is, and it is, heaven is a place where prayer is an everyday reality. God is there. We talk to God. We are in communion with God, and a communion that nothing can break. So surely if we're praying for heaven to come down to earth, we actually should be praying, speaking, conversing with God on a regular basis, as if we were there now, as if heaven were here now.

2. Or, think about it this way in the second place. If heaven is the place **where we arrive at home**,

and isn't this a common way of thinking about heaven? Heaven is homecoming, home at last, where we are at home. Every human being has this passion for home, this sense of restlessness that *we're not home yet, but we will be home some time*. If Heaven is pictured like that, as our home, and it is in Revelation, and if this is hunger in the depth of our being ...

then **shouldn't the church be to us like heaven? A true home for us, as well as a community that seeks to provide a home for all?**

- Spiritually: shouldn't this be a spiritual home for as many people as possible, and this should be our passion to make it so? Shouldn't this be a community where people find out how to get to their eternal spiritual home in all kinds of ways?
- But not just spiritually. Shouldn't this be a place, which treats people not just in spirit, but in body as people who need a home? We live in a world in which there are people who do not have a home. All of us here I suspect have a home, and it's critical for us. It's at the center, yes, the center of our being. What about those who don't have a home? Shouldn't this be our concern not only spiritually but literally, as well?

One of the things that I don't think we do very well in our congregation is to share some of the things that are going on around us and through us as a church, as a whole. Part of our mission, part of our outreach as a community is to be in touch with and to partner with the Community Council for the Homeless in Friendship Place, Friendship Heights. There's a program that our church is involved in called "Aim Hire." Now higher here is not spelled H-I-G-H-E-R, though that's the image, obviously: "aim higher"; but it's H-I-R-E. It's a program in which we partner with others to help those who have no home and have no employment, and have no hope of getting a home, to get a home for themselves and employment by which that home can be sustained for the long haul.

If you are on the streets and you have no job, the chances are that you will never get a job because you don't smell very good, you're not dressed very well, you don't have the ability to write a resumé, and you have no idea how you're going to interview well. If you're going to break that cycle, people need a place to be, to be refreshed, to sleep. And, from which they can learn those skills, which we take for

granted, which will get them in the door to a new life. It's a highly successful program, and it's part of our mission: we are involved.

Our church enables one person to have an apartment from which they can as it were graduate into employment again. We've done it once. We've just begun. We're doing it again and we will do it again and again and again. How critical this is, since heaven is like this, to be ambassadors of heaven on earth.

But here is my suggestion, that if we pray "on earth as it is in heaven," *one at a time* may only be just the starting place. What if NPC is known in our city as the place which not only provides a spiritual home for all who come, and shows people where their eternal home is. but we also become known in the city as the place, which cares that everyone who needs one finds a home and we do what it takes to make that happen. That would be to take this prayer very seriously, one powerful glimpse of heaven coming down to earth.

3. And then, one final picture of what it might mean if we were to pray that Heaven would come down to earth. If **heaven is the place, where people of every tongue and tribe and nation gather before God** (and that is the image from Micah: of all the peoples coming to the city where God dispenses justice) **then surely this is the kind of community we should be, now!** This is the kind of people that we should be: open to others. This is the kind of nation be: that we should work for as citizens within our nation.

This week, I re-read Martin Luther King, Junior's "I Have a Dream" speech. It's remarkable to think that it is itself 50 years old this year. Because the knowledge of the scripture is far less than it used to be, many people forget that this speech is filled with heavenly images taken directly from scripture. In particular, at critical moments in this speech, scripture is the driving force of what Martin Luther King, Junior had to say (see, e.g., <http://www.scribd.com/doc/79494374/Biblical-Allusions-in-I-Have-a-Dream>).

If this is God's perfect will, if this is what heaven is like, then shouldn't we be involved in the creating of this kind of world where we live? Martin Luther King, Jr. had it right: that if you hold up the image or vision of heaven high enough, and do not let it go, it will, in fact, do its work in leading people to put 'heaven' into practice, not all at once, not perfectly, but as much as possible, here and now, and not merely later. If heaven is the place where people are not judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. If heaven is the place where justice, as Dr King quoted from the prophet Amos (5:24), "rolls down like water and where righteousness flows like a mighty stream," then this is our calling now, and not just later.

So here is our prayer:

"Our Father" Jesus teaches us to pray. The door is open.

"Who art in Heaven." It's like breaking into the computer of the Pentagon: we can actually get into the very heart of God!

"Our Father, who art in Heaven." We're talking to God our creator.

"Hallowed be thy name." when all the pressure is for me to pursue my name.

"Thy kingdom come." When all the pressure is for me to rule my life.

"Thy will be done." Though I just want to do my own thing,

May I want to do God's thing, not just a little bit, but to the fullest extent "as it is in Heaven, so on earth."

Lord, may this be true. Even through us, even through us this is our prayer that Jesus teaches you and me.

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