

Matthew 6: 7-13
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Choose Your Words

This morning we find ourselves in the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, perhaps as Buz said last Sunday, the most famous sermon of all. Following the Beatitudes, Jesus continues speaking to his disciples, sharing his vision of who he expects his people to be. He lays out incredibly high expectations. He expects us not only not to commit murder but also to seek reconciliation when we are angry. He tells us that it is not enough to love our neighbors, that we are called to love our enemies and pray for those who harass us. At the beginning of chapter 6, Jesus turns to the question of how we practice our faith. He insists that prayer and worship and giving to the poor are never to be about drawing attention to ourselves. In other words, if we're in it—*it* being faith, worship, prayer—for credit or praise, we've already missed the mark. [Read Matthew 6:7-13, CEB]

It sounds different, doesn't it? Like the 23rd psalm, these words are so familiar that I rarely reflect on what exactly it is that they say. I chose to read from the Common English Bible this morning to help me, help us hear this very familiar prayer with new ears. It sounds so informal, so conversational, so direct. Could it be too informal, too conversational, too direct? God is God after all. And I am not. Nor am I Jesus. Can I really pray the way he seems to be telling us to?

I had the honor of meeting with the cub scouts last Tuesday night to talk about God and faith in between dodge ball games. They were wonderfully engaged and attentive and asked great questions. In the midst of our conversation, I asked them if they thought they needed to use fancy words to talk to God. It was about a 50-50 split. I insisted that they didn't need to find special words to talk to God. And yet Jesus does say, "Pray in this way." He does not require thees or thous. He is not saying that

there is a magic formula that we need to persuade God to hear our pleas. However, Jesus does seem to be offering a script of sorts to follow with what most of us refer to as the Lord's Prayer. To the disappointment of Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians everywhere, he doesn't even come down in a particular spot on the whole debts vs. trespasses controversy. In the end, Jesus does not seem all that concerned about the specific words.

Jesus begins with a vivid image: "When you pray, don't pour out a flood of empty words, as the Gentiles do." This is not simply an example of Jesus slamming those who are not Jewish. Remember, this is a continuation of the sermon begun last week. Jesus is reclaiming and shaping a community, not in a vacuum but in the shadow of the Roman Empire. He is painting a picture underscoring how the realm of heaven, the kingdom of God stands in stark contrast and in opposition to the oppressive ways of Rome. It is also important to recall that Jesus is not reinventing the wheel or starting from scratch. He is a Jew, shaped and steeped in Judaism. Like generations of prophets before him, Jesus is calling God's beloved ones back to the one true God and to the covenant made in the wilderness where God promised to be our God and we promised to be God's people. As Immanuel, God with us, Jesus reveals what God has expected and encouraged all along. When Jesus refers to the Gentiles and their floods of empty words, he recognizes that the disciples and the crowds eavesdropping on the margins live in a world where Caesar claims the title of Lord and Son of God. Prayers to this lord must take a certain shape. As one historian documents, the preface a prayer to the emperor often sounded like this:

Emperor Caesar Galerius Valerius Maximianus, Invictus, Augustus, Pontifex Maximus,
conqueror of the Germans, conqueror of the Egyptians, conqueror of the Thebans, five times
conqueror of the Sarmatians, conqueror of the Persians, twice conqueror of the Carpathians,
six times conqueror of the Armenians, conqueror of the Medes, conqueror of the Adiabeni,

Tribune of the people the twentieth time, Emperor the nineteenth time, Consul the eighth time, Father of his country, Proconsul...¹

And then Jesus says to begin simply with, “Our Father.” Not only is Jesus’ address 68 words shorter, it conveys none of the flowery rhetoric, none of the buttering-up of the other. Throughout the Old Testament God is named as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is and always has been a God known in relationship. Jesus insists that God knows what we need before we ask. Our praying is not about flattering God’s ego. Our praying is about using our words to name out loud who God is and what it means to be God’s children, Christ’s disciples. And it’s not about using more words. In fact, it may very well be about using fewer.

In a recent article, Dan Lyons writes:

The world is filled with overtalkers. You run into them all the time. They’re that pest at the office who destroys every Monday by recounting each unremarkable thing they did over the weekend. They’re that jerk who talks over everyone else at a dinner party ... They’re the neighbor who drops in uninvited and spends an hour telling you stories you’ve already heard, the arrogant know-it-all who interrupts colleagues in meetings, the CEO whose reckless tweet gets him charged with securities fraud...To be honest, they’re most of us, too. It’s not entirely our fault. We live in a world that doesn’t just encourage overtalking but practically demands it, where success is measured by how much attention we can attract: get a million Twitter followers, become an Instagram influencer, make a viral video, give a TED talk.²

¹ Eusebius Church History 8.17.3-10; cf. Lactantius On the Deaths of the Persecutors 34, <https://historyoftheearlychurch.wordpress.com/2020/05/17/56-the-palinode-of-galerius/> as cited by <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/narrative-notes/1-24>

² Dan Lyons, “Talking Less Will Get You More,” <https://time.com/6248092/talking-less-will-get-you-more/>

Like the disciples and Jesus' earliest followers, we live in an age in which we eat, live, sleep, and breathe talk. Lots and lots of talk, at least from those in charge, and very little of that talk offers wisdom, grace, peace, guidance, or comfort. Jesus' simple words about prayer run counter to all of that, beginning with addressing our prayers to God with two words, "Our Father."

Our Father. *Our*. Not my, *our*. This is not simply a private conversation between God and me about me and mine. *Our* changes our posture inviting us to recognize that God is the God of all—including the Gentile, the pest, the jerk, the know-it-all, the child at the border, and the aging parent with dementia. *Our* links us to one another in a way all the words in the world do not. Faith is not a solo voyage, nor it seems, is prayer. *Our* shifts the focus and directs us not only toward God but also toward those whom God also claims as beloved children. Yes, beloved. I am beloved. You are beloved. The Gentile, the pest, the jerk, the know-it-all, the child at the border, and the aging parent with dementia are all equally beloved by God, whom Jesus calls Father.

Jesus' calling God Father is not about gender per se, but about relationship. When I imagine a father, I picture an old photo of my dad and me. In it I am two and a half years old, tucked in his arms on the back of my grandfather's sailboat. The waves behind us are white-capped, and the boat is heeling a bit, and I am sound asleep without a care in the world. Sadly, not everyone shares this image when they think of a father. Some fathers are harsh, abusive, distant, or absent meaning that the notion of God as father can be complicated to grasp or difficult to embrace. Jesus' intent is not to force an image of God on us. Rather he is inviting us to understand God as strong, nurturing, faithful, and loving. And again, Jesus paints this picture not with a slew of grand titles but with one word, *Abba*.

Abba is neither Greek nor Hebrew. It is Aramaic, a common spoken language, not the language of the elites, but the shared language of the people, *our* language in a way.³

Some friends mentioned recently that their 20-month-old grandson wasn't walking or talking, at least not at home. As it turns out, he was talking and walking up a storm at daycare. I'm not an expert in child development, and I know all children progress at their own speed. And maybe the little guy was just using up all his words and wearing himself out with his buddies at school each day. Through the lens of this passage, though, I wonder, could it be that this little one actually trusts his parents enough not to need all the words with them? Could it be that he knows he will be fed when he is hungry, sheltered when he is cold, carried when he is tired, and loved when he is at his most unlovable without saying a word?

Dan Lyon—the writer I mentioned earlier—is a self-described talkaholic. He is determined to talk less because of the toll over-talking has taken on his work and his relationships. By pausing more, taking deep breaths, and being intentional as he heads into meetings on Zoom or into conversations with his wife and daughter, Lyon has curbed his tendency to talk too much:

For most of us, [he writes] talking is like breathing. You don't think about it; you just do it. But when you start paying attention to how you speak, this leads you to think about why you speak the way you do. You're forcing yourself to become conscious of something that usually happens unconsciously...You're turning your attention inward. You're engaging in self-reflection and self-examination. You're figuring out who you are.⁴

³ Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p. 95, as cited here: <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/narrative-notes/1-24>

⁴ <https://time.com/6248092/talking-less-will-get-you-more/>

Figuring out who you are... With this radically simple prayer, Jesus is calling us to figure out or to remember who *we* are and whose we are. We are children of a gracious Father who treasures us more than the lilies of the field, more than the birds of the air. Jesus wants us to understand that this God does not require cajoling or coercion. And yet this figuring out who and whose we are does not simply turn us in to focus our singular needs or concerns. Instead, it turns us out with trust in God and curiosity about for our fellow beloved children. This Father does not pit one sibling against another to gain his good graces nor does he sit back encouraging us to bite and scratch one another for a meager morsel. Instead, he invites us to use our not-so-fancy words, praying intentionally and faithfully to ask for what we—all of us—need. As we pray in this way, we learn to trust that we will have enough bread for today and ample grace for our own shortcomings and for those of others. And we just may find ourselves talking a bit less and listening a bit more, resting in the knowledge that we are and will be held close, sheltered from the wind, and buoyed over every last wave.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.