

Matthew 6: 9-13

Our Lord's Prayer?

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This month our topic and theme for worship is Judaism. You might wonder why a Christian Church would spend so much time studying Jewish culture or history. You might think that Christians and Jews are very different. You might assume that we parted ways with Jews 2000 years ago, and we have never looked back. But increasingly in our multi-cultural world we are re-thinking our religious differences, and looking instead for similarities in our faith journeys. In recent years many Christian scholars are starting to consider what it means that Jesus was Jewish, that he was born and lived a Jew from Galilee.

When we went to the Holy Land on our church trip in 2010, we visited a lot of archeological sites, and we looked at the places where Jesus lived and worked, to try to know more about him. There we discovered that Jesus grew up in a Jewish village with other Jewish children. He recruited Jewish disciples. He attracted Jewish people to his healings. Many of these stories in the Bible make the assumption that everyone was Jewish. It was so rare for an outsider to interact that when it happened, the gospel writer would make special note of it; that is why we hear about a Centurion or a Samaritan woman. All the others who never get mention were Jewish.

Yet, we forget that Jesus was Jewish. It is as though we have adopted Jesus without recognizing who he was and where he came from. It is as though we believed that our history as a religion started in the year zero- with a man just like us- a thin lanky white guy with a long beard. We don't think of Jesus as a short, muscular, olive skinned man with a prayer shawl. We promote the New Testament and elevate it to a much higher standing than the Hebrew Bible, and in the process we fail to see our own roots in the Jewish religion, and our own connections to our Jewish neighbors and friends.

Last week I told you that I wanted to encourage you to send me your ideas about this topic and your reactions to the sermons. One woman told me in the hallway that her grandfather was Jewish. I bet lots of you have some Jewish blood. I encourage you to think about your connections to your Jewish neighbors, and family as we explore the

connections we all have as people of faith. Whether we can find a biological connection to the tribes of Israel or not, we all have Jewish spiritual roots.

Today let's look at the Lord's Prayer. The hallmark of Christian devotion, the Lord's Prayer is seen as the original Christian prayer. We proudly label it **Our** Lord's Prayer. We pray it every week in worship and teach it to our children. Many of us recite it before bed. Couples say it when they take their vows of marriage. We recite it when someone is gravely ill. It is the quintessential Christian prayer, and the Christ's example of how we should all pray. It might come as a surprise to think that his prayer has anything to do with Judaism, but let's take a closer look.

**In the first play we see here in the Lord's Prayer that Jesus is show us that -Prayer sets limits.**

**It was the Jews who invented personal boundaries and time management.** In ancient times people rose every morning with the sun and never stopped until sunset, day in and day out. It was a Jewish story about the creation of the earth that helped people to differentiate between work and rest. Jews were among the earliest people to invent a 6-day work week, and offer everyone even the servants one day a week to rest, and relax and enjoy the fruits of their labor.

The Lord's Prayer begins with the words – Our Father- and many Christians assume that Jesus invented this way of addressing God. When Jesus prayed these words he was doing what Jews had done for over 500 years. The custom of calling God "Our Father" is so well-ingrained that today in synagogues around the world Jews say these words each week when they gather. But when Jesus called God "Father" he was standing up against the Romans, who referred to Caesar as Father. It was a custom in those days to call the emperor Father- it is not unlike the way that we sometimes call George Washington the father of our nation, but in Caesar's time it attributed enormous respect, authority and devotion to Caesar. It made Caesar the Roman subjects' first allegiance. It set Caesar on top.

So when Jesus told his disciples to start praying by saying Our Father in heaven, he was setting limits on Rome's authority. He was declaring his allegiance to an even higher power. He was declaring that God's power and authority surpassed any government, any party, any philosophy, and any economy. He was setting a limit on Roman authority.

**When we pray this prayer- we set limits too. We close our eyes, and shut out the world's values.** We step back and remind ourselves that God is supreme in our world too. We re-assess our lives in light of this belief and all our stories of faith that shape our understanding of what God wants. We remember an ancient people who made their

meals, put a sign on their doorposts, and taught their children to remember God each day. When we close our eyes we connect to a people who still stop every Friday night to set limits on the pressures of the week and weekend, and re-establish a sacred evening. We set our priorities lest we get swept up in the ferocious waters of the secular tide.

I don't know how you watch movies, but for years now I have subscribed to Netflix. It is a company that sends you movies and television shows every few days. You order your selections online and set up a queue of things you want to see. They send you your first movie on the list and when you finish it, you send it back and another appears in the mail a few days later. It has worked well for me for years. But it only works if you keep on top of the queue – that is go into your computer and keep selecting new things for your queue. So you must stay disciplined enough to go into your computer and check the website to see what is coming up next in your queue. If you forget to do that they will send you random movies that they think you will like, based on your other choices. How do I know this? I know it because it is happened to me on more than one occasion. I have become so overwhelmed with my life and work that I have forgotten to update my queue.

I confided my problem to a friend and she stood back and looked at me and said- “Susan, you need to get control of your queue.” I realized what a potent metaphor that is for modern life. When we get overwhelmed by all our obligations, things just seem to come flying at us. Messages and material comes at us, and we forfeit our ability to set our priorities or even establish order. Before long, we just start to re-act to everything and then it becomes harder and harder to find a way to control the queue of our life. Prayer offers a way to re-establish control. It offers us a way to stop throughout the day and literally shut our eyes on all the things that call for our attention, and set our priorities.

“Our Father who are in heaven” is code for – God is my focus and my loyalty to God trumps all the other demands of family or society, or work.

**Prayer has community implications.** When Jesus prays he says “Our Father” not “My Father”. Jews learned about faith in communities. Their faith was created and honed in a wilderness when they learned to live by the Ten Commandments. Their faith was nurtured in villages and towns where people supported one another as together they strove to love God with heart and soul and their neighbors as themselves.

Later in the Lord's Prayer when Jesus says "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" we see how clearly the way we treat one another is connected to our devotion to God. We recognize that faith itself is learned and lived in relationships. Jesus is not asking for forgiveness for small mistakes, or petty indiscretions, he is referring to the Jewish notion that no one should have to be indebted to someone else. He is saying that when someone you know needs money don't loan it to them so that they will forever owe a debt suggesting that we not allow other people to become indebted to us. If we see another person in need, we should give them what we can – not loan it to them. Not charge interest, but refuse to allow folks to become indebted to us. Prayer re-established right order in the community. That is why Jesus tells his followers to patch things up with their siblings or their enemies before they go to the Temple to talk to God in prayer.

**Finally, prayer is honest. Good prayers are not contrived. They are not haughty or obsequious. So Jesus tells us that when we pray we should pour out our hearts to God.** I see this in Jesus' line- "Lead us not into temptation but Deliver us from evil". It is the very prayer he prays again when he prays in Gethsemane. Don't make me do this God. Don't make me choose between the suffering of the body and the agony of the soul. Don't put hard choices before me. Jews respect that it is the hard times in life – the times when we make choices that pull us apart. The moment when we agonize and no path is easy, but we know we have to live with our decisions that really bring us to our knees.

**Honesty and integrity is a hot topic in the Bible.** Read the psalms and they describe the hardest moments of life. These words were ancient Jewish songs, laments, faith statements. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion." (137) "With my voice I cry out to the Lord. I pour out my complaints before God. No one takes notice of me...no one cares for me".(142) They are full of fantasies of evil that might befall an enemy. "Let the mischief of my enemies overwhelm them. Let burning coals fall on them. Let them be flung into pits". (140)

The psalms are raw and unedited and real. Jewish stories are not all cleaned up. They tell of brothers who hate each other, mothers who plot for and against their children, and marriages that fluctuate between good and bad days. When we examine our Jewish roots in faith we see that God does not want to hear pious prayer, God craves honest ones. Prayer offers a time to sit with God and ask for guidance, but also to ask for God's presence, God's company in the confusion of life. Prayer is a luxurious moment in our day when we enter God's garden and sit down to relax. Prayer is God's invitation to us to lay our burdens down, and find peace. Let us Pray